



The

She thinks
no one knows
she lied.

Mother's

She is
wrong.

Secret

From the #1 bestseller

KATHRYN CROFT

An absolutely gripping psychological thriller

The
Mother's
Secret

KATHRYN CROFT

10 CANELO

For Marti

PROLOGUE

We all make mistakes. Do things that can't be undone, no matter how much we wish we could retrace our steps, pause for a single moment to consider the consequences of our actions.

This, though, was not a mistake. I have never undertaken any action with such alacrity.

And I have no regrets.

You made your own mistakes, didn't you? Yet up until your very last moment you didn't doubt your judgement. Perhaps that was your biggest mistake, because maybe if you'd at least shown some remorse then I might not have struck that blow.

I had to do something to stop you.

And I was willing to do anything.

PART ONE

ONE

Now

I know you lied.

That's all the email says.

I check the sender's address: theliesthatbind@gmail.com. It should be illegal to hide behind an anonymous email address. Why should a person be able to obscure their identity online? I stare at the message again. Deliberately brief – designed to incite fear. What does this person know about me?

Next to me, Jamie sleeps, his elbow too close to my body. This is a double bed, yet whenever he spends the night it feels as though we're stuck together in a space as claustrophobic as a coffin. With a sigh, I nudge him further away. I'm not being cruel; sometimes I just cannot bear the hot sticky feel of anyone's flesh against mine. And now, I know I have something else to worry about.

Jamie mumbles something, and with his eyes still closed he edges back to me, so quickly I sit up and throw the duvet off my clammy legs. It's not even six a.m., yet sunlight streams through the window, making it feel as though it's already ninety degrees. It's only May and it's being reported that we're already having a heatwave not witnessed since the seventies, and while the whole country rejoices, I silently count the days and hours until the nights are shorter, and I can once again feel an ice-cold chill on my skin.

'Where are you going?' Jamie asks, his eyes still shut. I should have known he'd wake up the second I tried to grab some time for myself. He places his hand on my back, and I feel the excessive heat through the oversized T-shirt I've slept in. One of Aiden's, I think, and I wonder, yet again, why I haven't thrown it away like I have everything else. And why I even have it in the first place.

'I've got a load of work to do,' I tell Jamie, stretching my arms upwards. It's not a natural gesture; I just need something to distract me because I'm starting to feel the walls closing in on me. *Because it's time.* Perhaps I've

known this was coming, but the message pinging into my inbox this morning has cemented it in my mind. I have to do this now.

The excuses I offer Jamie come hard and fast: I'm behind with my marking, there are sessions to plan and students coming who will expect me to be prepared. I can't let them down.

'Eve,' Jamie says, his voice a croaky half-whisper, 'a bit longer in bed won't hurt, will it? Let me persuade you to stay.' His warm hand reaches for mine.

I flinch and pull away. 'Sorry, I can't.' He has no idea how important this day is to me; he's unaware of the nausea bubbling in the pit of my stomach.

He admits defeat too easily. 'Okay, spoilsport. How about I come over this evening after work? We can get a takeaway. Bottle of wine.' Lose ourselves in oblivion, he means. That's what we always do when we're together. I know what I'm hiding from but what about Jamie? I've only known him for four months, but everything I've learned about him could fit on a Post-it note: thirty-three – two years younger than me; a freelance website designer; twin sisters he doesn't get along with; and he lives nearby in Enfield. That's it. The extent of my knowledge. It's not that he doesn't share information, more that I don't let it seep into my brain. I can't let myself know more about him. Familiarity terrifies me. And if I asked questions of him, he would do the same, and then sooner or later I would slip up.

'I need a shower,' I tell him. 'Do you mind seeing yourself out?'

My small dining table is set up as it usually is for my tutoring sessions. The textbooks I'll need are in a neat pile, my pencil case parallel to them, and a stack of loose paper sits in the middle, where either of us can easily reach it. I've laid out a plate of biscuits, leaving off the custard creams. It's Maya who'll be coming, and I've never once seen her eat one, although the chocolate Bourbons always disappear.

Today, more than any other day, I welcome the distraction the next hour will bring; I don't want to think about what this morning's email means. Maya will appear promptly at ten a.m., if not a few minutes before, her large bag of textbooks and revision guides weighing her down. Tardiness is her enemy. 'I hate being late, miss,' she'd told me at our first session. 'It

makes me anxious and then I can't concentrate for the rest of the time.' I admire this punctuality in someone so young, and have told her so, even though I've never shared that I am exactly the same way.

Right on time, she rings the buzzer at 09:59, and I promptly let her in. 'Oh, miss, I'm so hot,' she gasps, pulling off her thin cardigan. 'How can it be so hot? This is London, we're not in Ibiza!'

I try not to shudder at being called *miss*; the title haunts me, reminds me of someone I no longer am, but I've long ago given up trying to get Maya to call me by my first name. 'It feels weird, miss,' she'd claimed when I first suggested it. 'Kind of disrespectful.' I don't point out that as she's eighteen, I wouldn't have any problem with her calling me Eve.

'It probably doesn't help wearing those,' I say now, gesturing to her skinny jeans, which have huge rips down the legs. 'Shorts might have been a better option today.'

She fans herself with her Oyster card and lets out a huge puff of breath. 'Or a bikini?' she offers, and we both chuckle.

It's only when Maya sits down that I realise something seems different about her today, aside from the sweat glistening on her skin, and the fact that her thick black hair is scraped back into a long ponytail. It's not her clothes – she's wearing one of her usual close-fitting tops, which always make me feel old. I long ago lost touch with fashion trends and now I select dark-coloured outfits that help me blend in. Clothes that make me look neither glamorous nor frumpy, just average and bland. No, it's something else about Maya. She doesn't seem herself.

'So, only two more weeks, Maya,' I say, pulling out two copies of an old exam paper. I slide one towards her. 'I thought we'd work on a practice question together. How does that sound?'

She offers a small nod and stares at the sheet, making no move to open her bag and take anything out. This is not like her. Something is definitely wrong. Immediately I assume the worst: she knows about me. It's caught up with me before I've even made the attempt to put things right. Nausea once again floods through me. Could it be Maya who sent me that email?

'Is everything okay?' I ask, forcing the words out. Even though I don't want to hear her tell me she knows what I did, I need to make sure she's all right. And she is still here after all, so maybe she wants to give me a chance to explain.

‘Yeah,’ she says, her eyes fixed on her hands, which she fans out in front of her. I’m surprised to notice her nail polish is chipped; she’s usually so careful about her appearance.

‘I know I’m just tutoring you for your A-levels, but I’m not a bad listener if there’s anything troubling you.’ *Please don’t let this be about me.*

Still without looking up, she opens her mouth but doesn’t speak.

‘Maya?’

I can’t see her eyes, so it’s only when tears splatter onto the table that I know she’s crying. Ignoring the discomfort I feel, I leave my seat and crouch down beside her, tentatively putting my arm across her back. She needs me, so I won’t shy away from soothing her.

‘Please talk to me, Maya. It’s possible I might be able to help. I’ll definitely try my best, even if it’s got nothing to do with your studies.’

She looks up, her dark brown eyes glistening. ‘It’s not schoolwork,’ she says. ‘Nothing like that.’

It must be family, then. All sorts of terrible scenarios cross my mind, and I try to recall what I know about her home life. As far as I’m aware, she gets on well with both her parents, and she’s close to her older sister who’s away at university. Nothing Maya’s said has ever set off any alarm bells, and I’ve been trained to look out for warning signs. I prepare myself to explain that if she’s in any danger then I will have to report it.

‘Then what is it? What’s happened?’

‘I’m pregnant,’ she blurts out, her eyes wide.

Aside from the fact that she’s only eighteen, this isn’t a catastrophe. Her words shouldn’t make my body feel as if it’s folding in on itself, as though I’m being crushed from the inside.

And all I can think is that I am the last person she should have told.

TWO

Before

I walk across the car park far too quickly, the ice beneath my feet threatening to topple me onto my back. My hand rests on my stomach but still I don't slow my pace.

Usually I enjoy the drive home, pleased to have that gap between work and domestic life, but right now I curse myself for wanting to settle in a different part of London than the school I teach in, just because I was worried about bumping into students at weekends. It will be at least forty-five minutes until I get back, and with every passing second I bleed more heavily.

Somehow, though, I still have that morsel of hope in me, and I pray that it will suddenly stop, that this time it's just one of those inexplicable bleeds which can happen sometimes. That this time my baby is still alive.

'Miss Conway?'

I don't turn around, even though I immediately recognise the voice. Justin Foley's father. The annoying parent who feels the need to try to meet me on an almost weekly basis, despite the fact that his son's doing well in school and is never in any kind of trouble. In fact, Justin is likely to achieve top grades in all his GCSEs.

If I keep walking, maybe the man will let this one go. After all, he hasn't made an appointment, so he could just be picking up Justin and it's just a huge coincidence that he's right behind me in the staff car park.

'Miss Conway?' Louder this time. Closer. I want to yell at him and point out yet again that my title is Mrs, not Miss, as he always insists on calling me. The school should be able to do something about nuisance parents. The scream is right there in my throat, waiting to erupt. I should shout the words at him, let out all my pain, make sure he knows that right now I'm losing another baby and he needs to leave me alone. For a second I almost do; the words are at the edge of my tongue, ready to fire out, but I quickly reconsider. There is no way I will share my personal business with this annoying man.

I ignore him once more and speed up. I'm nearly at my car and I fumble in my bag for my keys, longing to get home to Aiden and let out all the grief I've been bottling up today.

But then he's caught up with me and there is no way to pretend I haven't heard him.

'Sorry,' he says, 'I was calling but it's noisy out here, isn't it?' He gestures to the air.

I've never been grateful for the heavy roar of traffic until now. 'Mr Foley. How can I help you?' It's the most professional voice I can muster and it takes everything I've got to produce it. All day I've had to plaster a smile on my face, carry on as if my whole body, and my world, isn't crumbling.

'I was wondering if you've had a chance to speak to Justin's maths teacher yet. About him attending those extra evening sessions.'

This isn't the first time I've wondered why I wanted the head of year role. It's teaching I love: being in the classroom and witnessing those light-bulb moments when a student suddenly grasps what you've been trying to teach them. Not this. Especially not now.

It was only yesterday he was in my office requesting that I put his son's name forward. Yesterday. When I still had my baby inside me.

'I'm sorry, Mr Foley—'

'Alex, please.'

'Um, I'm sorry but as I explained yesterday, those classes have been set up specifically for students who are behind and need extra help. Justin clearly doesn't—'

'Right, okay. I understand. But I'd really like him to have some tuition. It's a crucial time, isn't it? We can't gamble with his future.'

I refrain from pointing out how overdramatic he's being. 'Then you have the right to organise that outside of school, Mr Foley, but it's not something we can provide for students who aren't—'

'I've got it!' He throws his hands up and smiles. 'Could you perhaps organise sessions for those students who are... more capable?'

This is the first time I've heard him admit that his son is actually very bright. While I want to wipe the smug smile off his face, he does have a good point. 'I'll look into that,' I offer, 'but I can't promise anything. It will all come down to funding.' *Please leave me alone now. I just need to get home.*

‘I’ve sent you an email,’ he continues, ignoring the fact that I’m turning around, oblivious to my silent pain.

‘Oh, have you?’ I feign ignorance though I noticed it this afternoon, and it remains unread in my inbox; it won’t be important.

‘Yes, just wanted an update really. I seem to spend so much time asking you about his other subjects and I forget that you’re actually his English teacher as well as his head of year.’ His eyes flicker to my stomach, which, once again, hasn’t even had a chance to protrude. Feeling like I’m wearing a sign across me, advertising it to the world, I wrap my jacket tighter around me.

Get rid of him. Say anything you can to make this stupid man leave you alone.

‘He’s doing extremely well in English, as he is in all his other subjects. You must be very proud of him, Mr Foley.’

He smiles. That’s worked. Perhaps he’s one of those parents who just wants to constantly hear how amazing their kid is.

‘Thank you. That’s great. Well, I’ll let you get on.’ He starts to turn away but spins around to face me again. ‘Um, are you okay? Forgive me for saying this but you look a bit pale.’

Hearing his concern makes it harder to keep my tears at bay. They are right there, ready to flood out, and I can’t let that happen in front of a parent. Or anyone at school, other than Sophie.

‘I’m fine, it’s just been a very long day.’

‘Okay. Keep me posted, won’t you?’

‘Posted?’ I can’t even remember what I’ve agreed to.

‘On the extra classes for Justin? His mum and I are a bit worried he’s not as focused as he could be. I’m sure you understand.’

What is wrong with this man? His son is one of the most conscientious students I’m teaching this year. Is there no communication in their house?

‘Will you be taking the English classes?’ he continues, even though I haven’t answered.

There are no extra classes. Probably never will be. Just leave me alone.

‘Because I know Justin thinks you’re a great teacher, and you’ve already got a rapport. It might set him back a bit if he had a different teacher.’

This man really is something else. I have no more of a rapport with Justin than I do any of my students.

‘Well, that’s nice of you to say, but—’

‘Anyway, you seem like you’re in a rush. How about I make an appointment instead? For next week? It would have to be after school, of course, as it’s impossible to leave work too early.’

No! I want to scream, but I don’t want to give him any excuse to complain about me. He’s just the type of parent who would do that, who would never see how aggravating he is and that he’s brought it on himself. ‘Yes, of course. Anyway, I’d better get going.’

I feel his eyes on me as I walk away and make a mental note to give Justin even more praise than usual when I next see him, just for having to put up with this man as his father.

Aiden’s in the kitchen when I get home, rooting through the fridge, pulling vegetables out and sniffing them before throwing them back in.

How can I tell him? This will be the fourth time I’ve had to break the news that there won’t be a baby after all. It might not be his body it’s happening to but each time we lose a pregnancy, part of him rips wide open, too.

‘You’re home early,’ I say, pulling off my coat and draping it over the back of a chair. I don’t have the energy to put it in the cupboard under the stairs. I don’t care where it goes.

‘I wanted to give you a break and cook dinner for a change. You need to rest and take it easy.’ He smiles and resumes his rummaging. ‘Not sure what on earth I can make, though. Might be looking at a trip to Sainsbury’s.’

‘I don’t need to rest or take it easy,’ I say. ‘Not any more.’ And the flood of tears bursts out, splattering across my cheeks, dripping down my sleeve as I try to wipe them away. It feels as though they will never stop.

‘Oh no!’ Aiden rushes over to me. His arms wrap around me, pull me in as tightly as they can. ‘I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. When? Why didn’t you tell me?’

Pulling back slightly, somehow I find the strength to explain. ‘This afternoon when I was in the middle of a lesson. I felt the gush but couldn’t check until the lesson ended. I kept hoping... I was wrong.’

‘And you carried on teaching? You should have come home.’

‘I couldn’t let my Year 11s down. We were doing exam practice.’

‘Oh, God, Eve.’ He pulls me in again.

My body starts to heave and guttural noises that barely sound human escape from between my lips.

Aiden holds me like that, not saying a word, just offering me his unspoken support. He strokes my hair until finally I’m ready to breathe again.

‘Are *you* okay?’ I ask, because this isn’t just happening to me.

‘Gutted.’ He shakes his head. ‘I really thought it would be okay this time. You were a lot further along. I was so sure.’

I warned him not to think like that, not to ever be sure until we were holding a baby in our arms. ‘I need a shower,’ I say, turning away because seeing him in pain is worse than feeling my own.

‘Let’s get more tests done, Eve. It’s happened too many times now. There must be a reason and they just haven’t found it yet. We need to know, don’t we?’

‘Okay,’ I say, already knowing we’ve had every test imaginable. Sometimes things are just unexplained, the answers hiding, mocking us. But I will keep that flicker of hope alive, for both our sakes.

THREE

Now

She's beautiful. Her hair, already shoulder length, is thick and shiny, not dark like mine, but almost identical to her father's dirty blonde tone. There is no doubt in my mind that this is Kayla.

I think of Claire, of all the hours I spent sitting across from her while she let me talk and say whatever I wanted or needed to, how she helped me see that I can be the mother Kayla deserves. And now I'm here, seeing my daughter for the first time since I had to walk away.

The woman she's with is holding her hand as they cross the road, and Kayla gazes up at her, smiling as they walk together. They are clearly both comfortable with each other.

It stands to reason that Aiden will have needed childcare. He's an architect and runs his own small business, so there is no way he could have left his job to be a stay-at-home father. The last I knew, his parents lived in Edinburgh, and were years away from retirement, so I doubt they would have moved back here, even though I'm sure they will have wanted to help out.

I have had just over two years to build myself up to this moment, but I'm still not prepared for the surge of grief that overwhelms me. Today was just meant to be about seeing her, even just catching the briefest sight of her, and I wasn't prepared to feel so bereft. Helpless. Guilty.

Then there is the email. It's all about to catch up with me and I can't let that happen.

Kayla is nearly two and a half now, and I know nothing about her, except what she was like in those early newborn weeks. What's her favourite colour? I like to imagine she likes royal blue, as I do, but looking at her now it's clear she loves pink. My absence will have shaped her, turned her into a child she might not have been had I not left.

Even though there's no chance either of them will know who I am, I keep my distance. I almost feel as if there is an invisible barrier stopping me getting too close. As if we live in two different worlds and will never be capable of connecting to each other's.

Being here, watching her like this, makes me feel like a criminal. Yet here I stay because there's no way I'm turning back.

Aiden won't have shown Kayla any photos of me, I'm sure of that. Once he'd come to terms with what I did, although probably never able to accept it, he would have tried to bury all thoughts of me and the life we had together. That's the kind of person he was; he dealt with things by pushing them aside, pretending they didn't exist and, instead, focusing on the here and now. Perhaps he had it right. Maybe things would be different if I hadn't been so terrified of the future and I'd instead learned to live in the moment.

The woman and my daughter reach the other side of the road – heading to the park, I'm sure – and just as they step onto the pavement, Kayla stumbles and falls to the ground. The woman struggles to maintain the grip on her tiny hand. Instinctively I rush forward, but quickly stop myself. She is fine, and the woman is lifting her up and hugging her tightly, opening her mouth to utter words of reassurance. Sharp pains shoot through my abdomen, threatening to bring me to my knees. That should be me comforting her. I fight the urge to run to her and grab her.

After a few moments, Kayla begins to laugh. I can't hear it, but the joy on my daughter's face is too painful to witness. Turning away, I head back to East Putney Tube station.

Now I know more than ever what I have to do. It might cost me everything, but I'm doing this for my daughter.

'She's not having a good day today,' Jo, one of the carers, tells me.

Most evenings I come here, sitting with Mum for hours until she wants to go to bed, and every time I wait for them to tell me that today she's been happy, that they actually saw her laugh, or even produced a hint of a smile. It's probably too much to hope that she will have taken part in one of the activities the staff arrange on a daily basis.

This is a decent place. I wanted Mum to be somewhere close to my flat in Southgate, and it was a brand-new building that even now, two years after being opened, still somehow looks clean and fresh. There's no denying the unmistakable smell here that speaks of illness and loss of bodily functions, mingled with lavender and all the other fragrances that are used to mask

everything else, but I'm so used to it that I no longer notice. All the staff I've come across are friendly, and I know Mum's well looked after here. No, it's more than that – the staff actually really like her, I can tell. But still, I never wanted this for her.

'She had an argument with Matilda and accused her of stealing from her,' Jo is telling me as she puts some towels away in the store cupboard.

I raise my eyebrows, wondering if it's possible that Matilda might have actually taken something. That this time Mum isn't mistaken and knows what she's talking about. I mention this to Jo.

She shakes her head. 'I wish that were true but Matilda's been in bed all day with a cold.'

Jo knows me well now; she's been here from the beginning, and I'm here three times a week, four if I can manage it around tutoring. I'm grateful that sometimes she'll sit with Mum and me, keeping us both company until she's needed elsewhere.

'Okay, thanks for telling me. I'll go and make sure she's okay.'

I rush along the corridor to Mum's room but hesitate outside her door because I never know what to expect. Usually she's happy to see me but not always. There have been occasions when she's screamed at me to leave her alone, as if I'm a stranger, right before begging me to unlock the door of the hotel so she can get the bus home. *It's right across the road*, she always insists, even though Pine View is nowhere near a bus stop.

'Hi Mum, it's Eve,' I say, pushing through the door. The smell of her perfume wafts across to me, mingled with the smell of cleaning products. Chanel N°5. Mum might often forget who people are, or what things do, but she never forgets to put on her perfume every morning.

I try to leave everything behind when I come here – all the baggage that weighs me down – and focus only on her. As hard as it is being here, seeing her like this, in some ways it's also an escape for me.

She's sitting by the window today, staring out of it with an open book on her lap. At first I'm surprised – she gave up reading long ago – until I realise it's her photo album.

'Eve, I'm so glad you're here. They've... they've locked me in again and I can't get out. I keep telling them I'll miss the bus if they don't open the doors, but they won't listen! Just what kind of hotel is this?' She turns back to the window. 'And it's raining, have you seen my umbrella? The red one with the yellow stripes?'

I head over and put my arm around her. She's describing the umbrella she had when I was a little girl, one I don't remember seeing as I got older.

'Don't worry, Mum, I'm here now and everything will be okay.'

Her shoulders are scrawny, as though there's barely a millimetre of flesh separating her skin from the bones underneath.

'You'll help me get to the bus stop?' Her eyes are large circles, pleading with me, and I can barely keep my tears from falling. I need to be strong for her. I'm the only security she has in this unfamiliar world. 'It's just across the road, you know. I really need to get home. I'll need my umbrella, though. Now, where could it be?'

'Yes, Mum. I'll help you get to the bus stop, and we'll look for your umbrella, but why don't we have a cup of tea first? I can tell you all about my day.'

She loves to hear my stories, even though she won't remember a thing I've said once I walk out of here. There is never anything exciting to tell her, so maybe it's just the lull of my voice she likes to hear.

There's no kettle to make hot drinks in Mum's room – it wouldn't be safe – so I head to the communal small lounge to make us both a tea, focusing on each step of the process so that anxiety doesn't cripple me. I've read all about mindfulness, how good it is for healing, but it's easier said than done actually practising it. Making tea for Mum anywhere other than her own house will always feel strange. She's been here for just over a year now, and every day I'm riddled with guilt that I couldn't continue to look after her myself. It was the third time a stranger found her wandering around by the busy main road that forced me to realise I had to do this.

When I get back and hand her a cup of tea, she thanks me and places it on the side table. She'll forget it's there now unless I keep reminding her to drink.

'You've been looking at the photo album.'

She nods. 'Yes, would you like to see it?'

I tell her I would, and don't mention that I could describe every photo in there and the order they follow, including the clothes everyone is wearing.

'Here, look!' she says, flipping the pages until she spots one.

I glance at the photo she's pointing to. It's the one of her holding me as a baby, where I'm wearing what looks like a christening gown, even though Mum insists it was just one of my usual outfits.

'Beautiful. Look at that face,' she continues.

And as I've expected, I feel the inevitable stab through my heart, because it's not me I see but Kayla. We were almost identical as babies. Quickly I turn the page because I don't want to think of it now, or picture her in the park with her nanny. Most of all, I don't want to remember my lie.

Thankfully, Mum doesn't seem to mind, and she's happy for me to flip through the rest of the album. All the other photos are harmless. My dad. Grandparents. Me as a young girl, much older than Kayla.

When we've finished, I read to her and then it's time to leave so Mum can have dinner with the other residents. There are only five of them on this level, which I'm thankful for. Mum has not enjoyed the few occasions when they've had all the residents eating together in the large dining room downstairs.

I stand and pick up our mugs of tea; both have been barely touched today.

'Where is she?' Mum suddenly asks while I'm pouring the tea down the bathroom sink.

'Who, Mum?' I'm used to this kind of question and wonder to whom she's referring this time. An old friend or colleague? It will be someone she has only just remembered, a memory that's formed suddenly.

'Your baby,' she says. 'Where's your baby? What have you done with her?'

And the mug I'm holding drops to the floor, smashing to pieces.

Jamie is waiting outside my flat when I get home, and my heart sinks. It shouldn't, but of course it does given the day I've had. My instinct always tells me that he's a decent man, but company is the last thing I need right now. And sometimes – a lot of the time – I can't bear to be touched.

'Maybe it's time I had a key?' he asks with a smile. 'Your neighbours will think I'm a stalker or something!'

I live on the top floor of a converted Victorian property on a fairly busy road, but no one pays any attention to anyone in London. There are faded Neighbourhood Watch stickers on lampposts, but I've lived here for two years and nobody has ever held a meeting or introduced themselves as running the scheme. 'I don't even know them,' I tell him.

Jamie's smile disappears. 'I was only joking, Eve.'

I try to offer him some reassurance, but my attempt falls short. I can't stop thinking about Kayla, and my pregnant student, and how badly I handled Mum's mention of my baby. She hasn't brought Kayla up for months now, and I thought I was safe from further questions. In the beginning when she'd ask, I'd simply tell her that Kayla was with Aiden, that I'd bring her next time, and soon enough Mum stopped asking.

'Do you mean me when I was a baby?' I'd asked when I'd recovered from the shock of her question. Despicable. Haven't I done enough harm to people without adding more lies?

'No. No! The baby,' she'd insisted. 'My baby. *Your* baby.' And she'd begun to get agitated, standing up and cradling her bony arms.

'Where's the baby?' she'd repeated, ignoring my attempts to comfort her.

And then I'd sat there and told her that I'd had no choice but to walk out on my baby and husband – that staying would have been the worst thing I could have done – because I couldn't bear keeping it from her any more. Or was it because I knew she wouldn't remember what I'd said the next time I saw her? I really hope it's the former.

She'd stared at me for agonising minutes, and I prepared myself for an attack. When she finally did speak, it was to ask me if I had the latest bus timetable.

'Are you okay?' Jamie forces me back to the present. I still haven't opened the front door.

'Just exhausted.' I offer a smile.

'Well, we could get a takeaway – save either of us cooking?' He doesn't give me a chance to answer. 'Look, I know we hadn't made plans to see each other tonight, and you've probably got a ton of work to do, but... well, I missed you. Ah, look, I've said it now. I missed you. And I bloody like you. A lot. What's the point in playing games and pretending I don't?'

I stare at him for a few seconds, unable to form a response. And he returns my stare, searching my face for a sign of anything positive, I'm sure.

'Okay, then. I see I've made a mistake,' he says when I can't speak, and he turns away, brushing past me as he walks off.

I should go after him; he doesn't deserve this. All he wants is a nice evening with me, so why can't I just give that to him?

Because you need to go now. Go and get your daughter back before it's too late.

FOUR

Before

When I first met Sophie, I didn't take to her at all. I've never told her this, even though she wouldn't be offended. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if she hadn't been particularly keen on me either.

I'd already been at the school for a year before she started – a fresh and confident newly qualified teacher – and was happy to show her around the department and help her settle in. I quickly realised that she was aloof, unfriendly, and didn't seem interested in forming any kind of friendship with any of her colleagues. I'd just met Aiden and our relationship was developing, so I didn't give anything other than work, and him, much time or thought. I kept my distance from Sophie, until she needed my help one day with a difficult student we both taught.

Sophie was already known as one of the strictest teachers in the school, but it didn't make any difference because for some reason Ryan Hart had taken a dislike to her and was constantly antagonistic in class. I, too, had initially had difficulty with him, yet, in time, we'd somehow managed to develop a mutual respect. I could never manage to explain to Sophie quite how that had happened.

'He's driving me crazy with his disruption,' she told me. 'I've tried everything other than killing him so what am I supposed to do?'

We'd both laughed, as inappropriate as her comment was, and that was the beginning of a friendship I can't imagine being without.

And now, seven years later, I sit on Sophie's sofa, marvelling at how clean and tidy her house is when she is a new mum of twins. Next to me, she effortlessly breastfeeds one of the babies, the other one sitting in his bouncer, kicking his legs out as if he's doing a fitness workout.

'Please don't look at me like that,' I say, forcing a smile.

'Like what?'

'With pity. Or guilt. I don't know... something.'

Sophie shakes her head. 'Oh, Eve, I'm so sorry. I was really rooting for you to be okay this time. I can't believe it's happened again.' Her eyes flick

to Jasper in the bouncer – or is it Jensen? They're nearly five months old and I still can't tell them apart.

'It's not your fault,' I assure her. 'Please don't feel bad.' Phrases like this have become programmed into my brain, an automatic response to stop people feeling uncomfortable around me. Do I mean them? I want to but most days I'm not convinced I do.

'I know,' she says, wiping some milk from Jasper or Jensen's chin. 'But it makes me feel awful that I wasn't excited when I found out I was pregnant.'

That's an understatement. The memory of that lunchtime is still ingrained in my head: me walking into the English office and finding Sophie in tears, something I'd never witnessed before, even when she was struggling with Ryan Hart. She hadn't planned it, she'd admitted through her fountain of tears. Damien and she had so many plans, so many things they wanted to do before they were plunged into parenthood. They were that kind of people: a couple who couldn't sit still and spent every school holiday abroad. The Inca Trail in Peru was next on their list.

'I'm too young,' she'd insisted, but then quickly admitted that, of course, thirty-two was not too young at all. 'You know what I mean, though. I'm not *ready*.' Then she hugged me, repeatedly telling me how sorry she was, that it was so unfair after everything I was going through in my desperate attempt to be a mum.

Despite the rocky start to her pregnancy, Sophie has embraced motherhood and makes it seem effortless, even with twins. 'Look at you now, though,' I say. 'You're an amazing mum and you love them to pieces.'

There it is: that guilt mixed with pity on her face that I don't want her to feel.

'It was the worst timing, though, wasn't it?' She bites her lip, chews it.

I'd just had my second miscarriage, so it was difficult to digest her news, yet still I clung to hope. I seemed to be able to fall pregnant fairly easily; it was keeping a baby inside me that was the problem. Back then I had no idea that I'd still be struggling now.

'What's happening to me is not your fault,' I tell her. I glance at Jensen or Jasper playing in his bouncer. I need to change the subject because this isn't good for me, or for Sophie. 'Will it be strange coming back to school?'

She immediately understands my need to change the conversation. 'I really thought I'd be dying to get back to work, but actually I'm not. Does

that surprise you? Who'd have imagined I'd be happy to be at home watching Baby TV? But I've kind of got into a groove here. It's actually quite nice not having to bother doing my make-up every morning. Or scrambling around making resources for my lessons. I never thought I'd say this but having twins is actually easier than dealing with thirty teenagers all at once.'

The room falls silent as we both realise that when we're together now, there is no getting away from baby talk, no matter how hard we try. This is Sophie's entire world now.

'So how are things at school?' Sophie finally asks.

'Nothing's changed,' I say, although perhaps everything has. She's been away from work now for so long that I can't even remember what I've filled her in on. 'Apart from that new maths teacher, Owen. Did I tell you about him?'

'Yes, you did,' she says, smiling. 'And are all the single teachers still after him?'

We both laugh, and for a fraction of a second it feels like it did before. Before my first miscarriage. When I was able to laugh without that underlying heaviness that cuts short any joy I feel.

'Come on, let's have some lunch,' Sophie says, jumping up with one twin then scooping down to lift the other out of his bouncer. 'These two could do with a nap and then I'll be right down to make us something. Omelette and salad okay? I don't think I've got much else in.'

Before she leaves the room I call her back. 'I feel awful for not knowing this but how do you tell the twins apart?'

Sophie chuckles. 'That's easy, Jensen has a bit more hair.' She gestures to the twin she's just been feeding. 'Don't feel bad, though – Damien still gets them mixed up.' She's about to walk off again but then she stops. 'Oh, I'm sorry, I should have asked you if you want to have a cuddle? I don't want you to think I won't let you hold them. Just, you know, trying to be respectful of your feelings.'

'I'd love to,' I say automatically, and before I can think further, Sophie is placing one of the twins into my arms. The weight of him feels strange for a second, but then as I grow accustomed to him and he snuggles into me, it begins to feel right. And if I close my eyes, just for a second I can pretend he is mine.

FIVE

Now

It wasn't hard to find out where Aiden lives now. He still runs his business from the same place in Ealing, and all I needed to do was make sure I got there before he left and follow him home from work. It felt wrong, intruding on his life in that way, and I had no idea what I'd do if he turned around and spotted me, but my desire to find Kayla was far greater than dealing with the consequences of discovery.

I wasn't expecting him to still live in Putney, assuming it would hold too many painful memories. For me, I had to get as far away as possible.

From across the street, I take in every detail of the house. It's nothing like the Edwardian property we rented together. It was always our plan to buy once we started a family, and I wonder if Aiden owns the one I'm standing before. It's a small semi-detached new build, and I'm sure he'd be able to afford it on his own.

There are lights on, so I know he's home, although I can't see anything through the blinds.

Kayla will be in there, and I want to picture her, but somehow the image of her from earlier has vanished from my memory. All I can see is a three-month-old baby, staring at me, expecting me to know what to do, to make everything better.

It's past nine p.m. now, heading nearer to ten, so she'll definitely be in bed – I know with certainty that Aiden will be strict about her bedtime routine. The reality is, though, I actually have no idea what their lives are like now, how they spend their time together or what kind of relationship they have. They are both strangers to me, where once I knew every inch of my baby, and thought I knew my husband.

It is strange to give him that label; he will have long ago stopped thinking of me as his wife, even though neither of us has tracked the other down to file for divorce.

Do I really think I'm going to knock on the door? No time of day would make it easier, but so late at night? It's not as if I briefly walked away from my life. It's been two years and three months, give or take a few days. Two

years which feel like seconds as much as they are a lifetime. But that email means the clock is ticking, so I must act now.

My feet move forward, taking me in a direction I'm desperate to go in, yet terrified of. Towards Kayla. I can do this – I just have to keep moving.

The front door opens, and I freeze. I'm not ready to be seen yet; it won't be on the terms I've prepared myself for. I want to be at the front door, not standing here across the road, purposeless. I need to have rung the doorbell, to ensure that I am the one who has found them, not the other way around. Even though it's already clear that I've been found.

There's no hiding place here. I am out in the open, illuminated by the street lights. There is nothing I can do. So I stop where I am – perhaps I'm not able to move even if I want to – and wait for fate to determine what happens. The loss of control is my worst nightmare.

It's her. The woman who was looking after Kayla this afternoon. She looks older than I assumed she was: nearer to thirty than twenty. Strange that she's still here when Kayla would have gone to bed hours ago. Then, just as my mind starts piecing together this scenario, Aiden appears behind her and pulls her towards him, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her on the forehead. She nestles into him, and I want to turn away but I can't. Once again I'm frozen. Mentally and physically.

Seeing Aiden with someone else shouldn't send excruciating spasms of pain through my body and weaken my legs. No. He stopped being mine the second I walked away.

But this changes everything. I am already far too late.

When I get home an idea takes shape in my mind and I can't let it go. I need to know everything about my daughter, including who the woman is. Although I don't know her name, I can look on Aiden's Facebook account and see if there are any details of her on there. He's never used social media that much but it's worth a try.

I deleted my own Facebook account years ago, when I was pregnant with Kayla, because suddenly it felt too intrusive to have my life out there. Even though I'd never been one to share personal things on it, it felt good to have no record of me on the Internet. Yet when I wanted to find Aiden, I set up an account with a fake name so that I could see his. The irony of this strikes

me now as my mind flits to the message I received that morning as I log on with my new email address, using my middle name, Farrah. I go straight to Aiden Conway's profile. My husband. His profile picture is an old one, one I took of him while we were on holiday in Portugal, and I'm shocked that he still hasn't changed it, especially given that he has clearly moved on.

My stomach churns as I scroll down the page. Surprisingly, Aiden's account isn't private. Possibly because he doesn't use the account much, but Aiden hasn't been strict with his security settings and I can see a few photos from the past year or two. There aren't many, just some of Aiden with work colleagues at a Christmas party, but the most recent one is one he's been tagged in.

Nicole Richardson has tagged Aiden Conway in a post.

And now I'm staring at the woman I saw earlier at his house, and at the park with Kayla on the first day I went there. Nicole Richardson has her arm around Aiden, their faces so close together that it's hard to tell where one begins and the other ends, as if they are one person.

I can't breathe. They look so in love, so *right* together that it's hard to see how Aiden and I ever fitted each other. That photo makes it look like no one else in the world exists except the two of them. And Kayla, of course.

Desperate to see a photo of my daughter, I keep scrolling through Aiden's timeline, not surprised when I find no trace of Kayla. Aiden would never plaster our daughter all over social media; he was too protective of her, too private, even when she was a newborn baby.

I click on Nicole Richardson's name, but her account has the highest security settings, so I can't see anything aside from her name and profile picture. Closing Facebook, I shut my laptop and try to control my breathing.

Nicole Richardson, who are you?

Jamie opens the door and stares at me. I thought he'd be happy that I'm here, that I was doing something good, putting something positive into the universe to make up for what I've done. I could have stayed at home, agonising over my next steps, but I've come here now to show Jamie that I

do care about him. Instead of being pleased, though, he seems disappointed. Almost on edge.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘I shouldn’t have just turned up here. I know it’s late.’ I turn to walk away but he steps out and reaches for my arm.

‘Don’t go. I’m the one who should be sorry for just leaving like that earlier. What can I say – I’m an arse sometimes.’ He chuckles. ‘Want to come in?’

I glance up at the window of his flat. It’s usually Jamie coming to my place, so it feels odd being here. Out of my comfort zone. ‘I just came here to apologise,’ I tell him, making no move to go anywhere.

‘Well, can you come in and do it? I know it’s not cold out but I don’t really want to be standing barefoot on my doorstep. Excuse the mess, though – I didn’t think I’d have company this evening.’

Inside, Jamie tidies away the remains of his dinner, which he’s left on the coffee table, while I sit on the sofa and wonder what I’m doing here, despite my earlier determination to do this for him. I can’t get the image of Nicole Richardson out of my head and nothing feels right any more. There’s nowhere I want to be except with my little girl. And even though I have no right to want this – I don’t want her around a woman I don’t know.

‘Shall we watch something on Netflix?’ I suggest, because that way I don’t have to talk. Even though I’ve come here with the intention of proving to Jamie that I do want to be with him, I can’t seem to offer anything of myself right now.

‘Okay,’ Jamie agrees. ‘Netflix it is, then.’

Jamie convinces me to stay the night, and I lie in his bed, listening to the soft sounds of his breathing. I can’t tell if he is asleep as he’s facing away from me. I’ve been refreshing the inbox on my phone, wondering if another email will come, but so far there have been no more messages. I’m sure it’s just a matter of time.

I’m distracted, even more so than usual, but I keep reminding myself that there’s nothing more I can do tonight. Kayla will be asleep, and there is no way I can go back round there at this hour and demand to see her. Finding out that Aiden is with someone else has thrown me off course, making it more urgent that I get to Kayla.

Does Nicole Richardson live with them? Does Kayla think she’s her mother? I only have myself to blame but these questions burn inside me,

fuelling my anxiety, along with the fear that's been there since I read those words. *I know you lied.*

'Who are you?' Jamie says, turning and resting his hand on my stomach. He traces the line of my thin C-section scar with his finger. Surgery to remove fibroids, I've told him, and he's never pushed for more details.

'What do you mean?' I ask.

'We've been together, what? Four months? And I feel like we barely know each other. Maybe it's because we met in such a random way.'

An accidental meeting in a coffee shop. Something that could so easily not have happened if I hadn't left my phone on the table. Jamie had come running after me, shouting at me to stop. I didn't turn around to start with because I thought he was just trying to talk to me – I'd seen him looking in my direction too often in the coffee shop and, although he was attractive, I didn't want to get to know anyone. Or for anyone to get to know me.

'No, I don't think that's it,' I say. 'Sometimes it's just better to stick with the idea we have of people,' I tell him. 'Safer. Don't they say ignorance is bliss?' This is definitely true; before the email came, and before I found out about Nicole, I at least felt I was on stable ground. Now the earth feels as though I could crash through it at any moment.

Jamie frowns. 'And what does that mean?'

'Nothing.' But also everything. If he really knew me then he wouldn't want me here in his bed. I know that as a fact. 'Just that you probably like the *idea* of me,' I tell him.

'That's all there is to like until you get to know someone, though. But why won't you let me know you? And you don't seem to want to know me either.' He's not sulking as he says this, merely stating facts. 'I feel like you're not... invested in us.'

I don't speak. What can I say that won't be a lie? He deserves more than this, even if *I* don't.

'I'm sorry, Jamie.' Now I feel vulnerable. Exposed. Why can't he just leave things as they are? The walls begin to close in on me.

'Sorry for what? Not liking me enough?'

In a way he is so very wrong. He will never know the steps it's taken for me to share even this little of myself with him. 'Jamie, it's late and I'm tired. Can we please talk about this another time? Please.'

'Right, okay. Another time.'

He turns away and silence folds over us. I close my eyes, knowing there will be no sleep for me tonight.

And minutes later, maybe even seconds, Jamie speaks again. 'You need to like me enough or leave me alone, Eve.'

As I stare at his back, it hits me how easily Jamie's fondness would be able to turn to hatred.

SIX

Before

‘You haven’t been honest,’ Aiden says.

We’re walking along the canal, holding hands, yet both of us in separate worlds. Sometimes it’s the things we do that tear relationships apart, and other times it’s the things we can’t have.

It’s freezing outside, even for January, and I pull my scarf tighter around my neck. ‘What do you mean?’ I ask this, even though I already know.

‘At the adoption meeting. You were so quiet. You don’t want to do this, do you?’

We’ve spent the last couple of hours talking to a social worker called Casey, going through the entire process. The whole time we were talking I got so caught up in Aiden’s happiness, in his desperation to be a father by any means, that I let myself get carried away.

Now, though, the doubts have set in.

‘I do... I’m just...’

‘I know it might feel strange for you – but look at my mum and dad. Do you ever feel that they’re anything other than my parents just because they adopted me?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘It’s too painful to carry on hoping, Eve. I feel like every time it happens it breaks you even more.’

Four miscarriages. Nothing since then. Not even a sniff of a pregnancy. But I’m not broken. I’m not ready to give up.

‘Think about it, Eve. We’re not eligible for IVF funding and, even if we were, there are no guarantees it would work.’ Aiden squeezes my hand. ‘I look at my own parents and it doesn’t bother me that I don’t share their genes. They’ve been the most amazing parents, and role models, that I could wish for. We just want to be parents, don’t we? To hear a little voice calling us Mummy and Daddy.’ This is something Aiden has repeated to me often, so I know he means every word.

Still, my mind searches for reasons to fight this. ‘Casey said we’re both young. I’m only thirty-one, Aiden, and you’re thirty-five. What if we

haven't given it enough time?'

'Then we could still keep trying. You know I come from a big family; it wouldn't be any problem if you got pregnant after we adopted. It would be... amazing!' His smile stretches across his face. 'And you've always said you were lonely being an only child, that you wanted to have at least two kids. You even said your mum wished she'd had more because your dad was always working away and you had to play by yourself while she was teaching her piano lessons.'

Aiden's mention of Mum reminds me that I have yet to share with him that I'm worried about her; I've noticed lately that she's forgetting things I've only just told her.

'So, what do you think? Shall we go for it?'

'Yes,' I say, 'let's do it.'

'Are you okay?' Aiden asks later that evening.

I'm curled up on the sofa, cradling the mug of tea he's made me. 'You just don't seem yourself.'

'It's all a lot to take in, isn't it? I mean, are we really doing this?'

'Yes, of course. I'm so ready for this, Eve, aren't you? It just feels right, doesn't it?'

The truth is that since our adoption meeting, I've become more convinced that this is not the path for us. Do I tell Aiden the truth and crush him, or soldier on for his sake? He's given up hope of me giving birth to our child, and I'm not ready to do that. It's only now I can admit that to myself, after the reality of what adoption involves is starting to set in. It's easy to look at Aiden as an example of what can go right, but my mind keeps focusing on all the things that can go wrong.

'Do you really not care?' I ask. 'About having a child with no genetic link to you. I imagine that sometimes being adopted could make it even more important to someone to have biological children.'

His answer is immediate. 'No. I really don't care about that. Maybe that would bother a lot of people but it doesn't worry me, and believe me, I've given it a lot of thought. I'd still be a dad, wouldn't I? Still do all the things any parent does, so why does it matter if the child doesn't have my genes?'

He says he has given this a lot of thought; when did it first occur to him? How many miscarriages did it take for him to give up on what we've wanted so badly?

I'm about to ask him this when the house phone blares out. I stare at Aiden for a second. Someone calling at this time of night can never be good news. He answers it while I'm still registering what's going on.

'Hello? Oh, hi, Jackie. Everything okay?'

I freeze. It's Mum.

'Hang on a sec, here she is.' Aiden hands me the phone.

'Can you believe this? I've locked myself out,' she says before I've even greeted her. 'Do you think you could pop over with my spare key?'

Frustration overshadows my relief. Pop over. She's making it sound as if she lives around the corner, when Redhill is actually over an hour away from us. 'Of course. But it will take a while. What will you do until I get there?'

'The back gate's open – I'll just sit in the garden and wait.'

'Mum, it's freezing! Can't you go somewhere in the car?'

'Well, I could but the keys are inside with my house keys. They're all on the same key ring.'

This isn't like Mum. She's usually so organised, so together. 'Where had you been this evening, then?'

She hesitates, and I wonder if I've crossed a line, if I'm treating her like a child when she's sixty-two. 'To Rosemary's. I decided to walk as it was a nice evening.'

'Okay, well, I'll be there as soon as I can. But can't you call Rosemary? I'm sure she wouldn't mind picking you up and letting you wait at her place?'

'Oh, no, I won't do that. She's probably gone to bed. It's late, isn't it? Don't worry, I'm fine just waiting in the garden. I've got a book in my bag so that will keep me occupied until you get here.'

There's no point arguing with Mum – she's too stubborn. Whenever I point this out she just laughs and tells me it's where I get it from.

As soon as we end the call, I relay to Aiden what's happened then reach for my mobile and scroll through my contacts; I'm certain I have Rosemary's number here somewhere.

'I'll go,' Aiden says. 'It's late and you have to be up earlier than I do. It's a long drive.'

I assure him I'll be fine. Besides, I think Mum would be embarrassed if Aiden turned up. She didn't even tell him on the phone what had happened.

'What are you doing?' Aiden asks. 'Don't you need to get going? Otherwise it will be nearly midnight by the time you get there.'

I tell him I need to make a call and press the phone to my ear. I'm about to hang up when Rosemary finally answers, her voice groggy.

'Eve? Oh! Is everything okay? Is your mum okay?'

I apologise for calling so late and tell her about Mum locking herself out of the house.

'Oh, that's annoying,' she says. 'Why didn't she call me? She's welcome to stay here if she can get here by cab. I've been out with some old friends this evening and had a couple of drinks.'

'Wasn't Mum with you?' I know the answer before she even speaks.

'No, love. I actually haven't seen her for a couple of weeks. I've been meaning to catch up with her, though. Is she okay? Shall I call her and tell her to come here?'

Mum won't thank me for calling her friend, but there's no way I can leave her outside in the cold, especially this late at night. It's a pretty safe area, but I still can't bring myself to do it. 'Actually, I know it's a big ask but would you mind jumping in a taxi and going to pick her up? Then I can come straight to your house to get her? I'll pay for it, of course.'

Rosemary doesn't hesitate. 'That's no problem at all. I'll just get dressed and go.'

'Thank you. Traffic should be okay at this time but I'd better get going. Sorry again for calling so late and asking such a huge favour.'

I put on a coat and check through my bag for Mum's spare key. 'I'm worried about her, Aiden. Don't you think this is all a bit weird?'

'What do you mean?'

'The fact that Mum forgot her keys for one. She never does stuff like that.'

'Eve, we *all* do things like that from time to time, even the most organised of us.' He smiles to show me he means me.

'I know, but there's other stuff too. I've been meaning to talk to you about it but, well, with everything that's been going on I just haven't brought it up. It will have to wait now.'

Aiden follows me downstairs. 'I think sometimes you read too much into things, Eve. You shouldn't always analyse things beyond their surface, you

know. Sometimes there just isn't more than what we see.'

Now is not the time for this discussion; there are more urgent things to devote my headspace to. Perhaps he is right; I do tend to overthink things.

But what can explain why Mum lied to me tonight?

SEVEN

Now

It's been easy to ignore that email, erase it from my consciousness, because I don't want to accept it. But now, as I sit holding my phone and staring at new words, I know that I need to act faster.

Nowhere to hide

Deliberately vague, just like the first one. Yet I know exactly what it means. It means that I need to get Kayla back, and I need to do it now.

'Miss, did you hear me?' Maya's voice breaks into my thoughts.

'Sorry. Tell me that again.' There are still a few minutes left of our session, but Maya has already completed all the tasks I've set her today.

'I was asking you what you think I should do. About this.' She rubs her stomach. There's no bump there yet; her action must be purely instinctual. I haven't seen her since she revealed her unplanned pregnancy during our last session, and it's taken almost an hour for her to bring it up, so I'm a bit taken aback that she has.

'Oh. Um. Well, it's your decision of course. Only you know what's right for you.'

She raises her eyebrows. 'Please don't say that. I know you're right, but I want to know what *you* think I should do. What would *you* do?'

Part of me wishes I could tell her the truth: that I'm the last person she should be seeking advice from. 'I don't know if I can answer that,' I say. 'It's got to be your choice, Maya. I can't influence your decision; it wouldn't be right.'

She stares at the ceiling and her eyes start to glisten. 'My choice.'

'Yes, that's what I want to make clear. This is *your* choice – nobody else's. It's your body.' I pause, wondering whether to ask this next question, or if it's delving too deeply into her personal life. She's already told me about the pregnancy, though, so it's probably too late to worry about that. 'Does the father know?'

She nods. 'Yes. And he's a good guy. We've been together a few months, and he says he's happy with whatever decision I make.'

I'm relieved to hear this. 'Does he go to your school?'

'No. He's a bit older than me. Twenty-two. I know his cousin and we all just hang out sometimes. That's how we met. But he really is decent. He's just finished college.'

'You're both so young,' I say.

'I know, but we could make this work, couldn't we?'

Maya is desperate for me to give her an answer, to help her reach a decision, when I should have nothing to do with this. 'Yes, if that's what you really want. Plenty of people have children young. Do your parents know?'

'No, but I won't be able to hide it for much longer. I might start being sick or something soon.' She gently pats her stomach. 'I will tell them. I just need to get my head around it first. Once it's out there it becomes real. No longer just about me and Connor.' She stares at the wall for a moment, frowning. 'I'm only eighteen. I've got university and then a career to think about. How would I be able to do anything?'

'People have overcome much harder situations, Maya. But it's important not to go through this alone. I'm sure your parents will support you if you open up to them.'

She reaches for her pen and repeatedly clicks the nib. 'I don't know. They're great and everything, but we've never discussed anything like this. I don't actually know how they'll react. I think they'll be disappointed. They just want the best for me. They'll see this as a huge mistake.'

I think of Mum, of how much I keep from her, and not just because of her illness.

'I'm sure they'll be there for you, no matter what. I really think you should talk to them. You'll feel much better for it.' My words feel hollow, as if there is no meaning behind them. I am the last person who should be giving Maya advice about her pregnancy.

'I do feel better just talking to you,' she says, taking me by surprise again, because I'm not sure how I'm able to talk to her about pregnancy.

'I can't tell you what to do, Maya, but I can listen if that's what you need.'

'Do you want children, miss?'

Her question shoots out so suddenly it floors me, takes away my breath. 'It's got to be the right time,' I manage to say.

'Yes, you're right,' she says. 'And this isn't for me, is it? How will I ever do anything? I've got at least another twenty years to think about having a baby. I must be crazy.' She starts gathering her things together.

'No, Maya, I didn't mean it like that. My situation is very different.' I should tell her about trying for so long to have a successful pregnancy, about how we can't just assume we will have a baby the minute we decide we're ready. I can't speak about any of that, though, because I fear once I start I won't be able to stop. And no one can know.

'It's not different, though, is it? And you're older than me, so how can I even think that I'm ready for this when you aren't yourself?'

Her tears come hard and fast now, and I instantly put my personal discomfort aside and rush forward to hug her. 'Look, just calm down and don't do anything hasty. This is a huge decision to make, and the pregnancy hormones could be playing havoc with you. I strongly recommend you take some time to think about it all. And please will you talk to your parents? And talk to Connor some more. Make sure you both see things the same way, that's so important, Maya. You're in this together, aren't you?'

She nods, but when she looks up at me her expression is blank. And when she walks out of the door, I realise I have made things worse.

There's no answer when I ring Sophie's doorbell, standing here as if two years haven't passed, as if I was only here yesterday. There is no telling how she'll react to seeing me, but I need to be with my daughter and, of all people, Sophie should understand that.

After a few more seconds of silence, I turn to walk away, resolving to come back tomorrow, and then I hear my name. I recognise the deep tone immediately. It's Damien. I wonder if he's her husband now – they were always talking about getting married. He's standing by the open side gate, staring at me with a frown. How long has he been watching me?

'Eve, is that you? My God, it is.' He's still frowning, and staring at me as if I'm a hallucination, some trick of his mind. I can only imagine what's going through his head.

Taking a step forward, I assure myself I can do this. I've got to get used to the shock I will invoke in people when I reappear. 'I know this must be a bit of a surprise but is Sophie here? I really need to talk to her.'

He glances at the house and walks towards me. 'She's not home. She took the twins to the park.'

'The one around the corner?'

He nods and continues staring at me. I almost wish he would just ask me why I did it; it couldn't be any worse than facing his silent disapproval.

'I'll go and find her there, then,' I declare, and although he doesn't say anything, it feels as though his eyes are tracing my movements as I walk away.

The park is exactly as I remember it. It's Saturday, so it's busier than usual and this fuels my confidence. Somehow, it feels as though it will be easier to talk to Sophie while we're surrounded by people. I can't explain why; perhaps it's something to do with there being safety in numbers.

The twins will be around three and a half years old now, unrecognisable to me, just as Kayla was the other day. They, like my daughter, won't even know who I am, even though their mother was once my closest friend.

Nerves overwhelm me as I get closer to the bright yellow gate. I don't know if I'm ready for this, but if it brings me to Kayla then I have to see it through. *Whatever it takes.*

Sophie's standing in between two swings, easily pushing both of the twins at once. Nothing's changed then; Sophie, for all her initial reluctance, still makes motherhood look easy. She's wearing a grey hooded top and skinny jeans with white trainers; her hair is tied up in a messy bun on top of her head. A *mum bun* she always called it. A pair of oversized sunglasses are perched on her head, and she looks effortlessly glamorous, even dressed so casually. The boys, of course, are huge compared to my memory of them, and I would never have recognised them as hers.

As I watch the three of them, I wonder what kind of mother I would have been if things had been different. If I had been able to stay with my daughter. It's a question I'll never know the answer to.

Sophie spots me the second I'm through the gate, squinting at me through the sunlight. Stopping her rhythmic pushing of the swings, she stands

shaking her head with her hands on her hips, waits for me to approach.

‘I didn’t believe it when Damien texted me just now,’ she says. ‘I told him he must be mistaken and he’d got you mixed up with someone else. I said there’s no way, but it’s really you.’ She lifts the twins from their swings. ‘Just play on your own for a second, boys. Mummy needs to speak to someone.’

Someone. That’s all I am to her now.

‘What the hell, Eve?’ she says once the twins are out of earshot.

Where do I begin? There’s so much I can’t bring myself to explain to her, not before I’ve talked to Aiden first. I hope she’ll understand that.

Sophie doesn’t give me a chance to say anything. ‘Does Aiden know you’re back?’

‘No. I know I’ve got a lot of explaining to do,’ I tell her. I barely recognise my voice. I’m not used to speaking to people who know things about me. ‘Can we go over there?’ I point to the bench that a mother and her toddler have just vacated. ‘You can still see the twins from there.’

‘Fine,’ she says. ‘Boys, I’ll just be over there.’

‘Go on then,’ she says as soon as we’ve sat down. With no sunglasses on, the sun glares at me and I can barely see her, so I stare straight ahead, watching her sons tear around the park. They are carefree in a way that Kayla will probably never be. I have scarred her for life with my actions.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘I don’t know how to begin trying to explain, but I just want you to know that I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s not me you need to apologise to,’ she says. ‘It’s Aiden. And Kayla. Your daughter.’ Sophie’s not going to make this easy for me. ‘How could you do it, Eve? Walking out on them like that. Kayla was three months old!’ She shakes her head. ‘I can’t even look at you.’

I have to face her admonishment, but I will stand my ground. There are things Sophie can never begin to understand, things I will never let her. ‘I’m here to put things right. With everyone, especially Kayla and Aiden. I needed to see you first, though.’

‘Two years later you want to put things right?’ She shakes her head again. ‘Why now?’

This is a question with too many answers. *Because I’ve never stopped loving my daughter, never stopped thinking of her; because I need to put right what I did; because of that email.* I try to explain to Sophie that I’m

here to do what's right for Kayla, but, understandably, she is struggling to get past her anger.

'Look at me, please. You were my best friend and I let you down, I know that. But if our friendship meant anything to you then can you please put your anger aside and help me?'

Her expression softens, offering me a glimmer of hope that we can get through this together. 'You've hurt people, Eve. The people who cared about you the most, and now you just want... what? Forgiveness? That's asking a lot.'

I fight the urge to hang my head, shrink into myself; I will stand my ground in spite of everything. Sophie has always had the ability to diminish people. I just never thought she could, or would, do it to me.

'You met someone else, didn't you?' she demands. 'Thought you could have a better life with him? After everything you went through with Aiden. My God.'

'No! That's not what happened – I swear to you.'

She turns away from me, focuses her attention on the twins. 'That's what we all assumed. Including Aiden. Why did you leave, then?'

'I... I just had to. Please look at me, Soph.'

She turns to me and her eyes narrow. I'm fighting a battle I can't win here.

'Can we meet up later and talk somewhere else?' I ask. 'When the twins are in bed? Around eight maybe? We can talk about it all then.'

She shakes her head. 'I don't think you coming to my house is a good idea. You shouldn't have even gone there just now. Haven't you heard of calling? Giving people a warning when you're about to reappear out of the blue?'

Her words sting, but I let it go. 'If you don't want me in your house then come to my flat.' I reach into my bag and scribble my address on a sheet of paper. It would be much easier to tell her it verbally so she could put it in her phone, but I don't want to give her any excuse to not take it.

'I don't know,' she says.

'Just think about it, please, Soph. I'll be home all evening.'

Even though I don't want to leave without any assurance that she'll come, I stand up and walk back through the park, ignoring the joyful squeals of laughter that fill the air. The sounds of family life that I will never have.

It's up to Sophie now. I just hope she's quick because the clock is ticking and it's only a matter of time before I get another email. Or worse.

EIGHT

Before

‘Are you okay?’ Helen asks, leaning across to my table. It’s Year 11 parents’ evening and, although I normally enjoy them, I could do without it tonight. This is the first time I haven’t sat beside Sophie, and it feels strange that she’s sitting at home with her babies, rather than here. Helen is friendly enough, but I’ve never felt comfortable enough to open up to her like I always have with Sophie.

‘I’m just tired,’ I tell Helen. ‘It’s been a long day.’ I stare at my appointment list and see that Justin Foley is due next. No doubt it will be his annoying dad with him again, but at least his father always turns up; many parents don’t bother.

They’re not due for a few minutes, so I pull out my phone to text Aiden. Things between us have been strained since I admitted to him that I don’t want to go ahead with adoption, that I’m not ready to take that step. My decision hit him hard. His dream of being a dad had been tangible, just for a short while, and now I’ve ripped it away. Now we are back to square one, with no idea when it will happen, or if it ever will.

I’m typing my message when Justin appears, still in his school uniform. ‘Hi, miss.’ He sits down, and when I look up I’m surprised to find he’s alone.

‘On your own?’ I ask, wondering how I can have this session without any parent present.

‘Oh, no, Dad’s here. He’ll be here in a second.’

And then the man himself appears. ‘Miss Conway,’ he says, holding out his hand for me to shake. ‘How are you?’

‘Fine, thank you. Let’s get started.’

For the next few minutes I try not to think about anything other than Justin’s progress, and after several moments, I even find myself warming, ever so slightly, to his dad.

‘I forgot to ask if you can do extra tutoring sessions, miss?’ Justin asks when we’re just about finished. ‘I’m getting a bit worried about exams now and don’t feel I’m on top of all the revision.’

His father hasn't even mentioned this lately and hasn't sought to have a meeting for a while, so I'd given it no further thought. I'm surprised the request is coming from Justin when his father is standing right here. 'Um, I don't really—'

'We'd pay you, of course,' his dad interjects. 'Whatever the going rate is. I just want the best help for Justin.'

I'm about to repeat what I've already told him many times – that Justin is fine and really doesn't need the extra help – but I glance at my student and see his desperation. 'Please, miss.'

'I suppose I could help,' I say.

'Great,' says Mr Foley. 'We'll be in touch.'

They both stand to leave and before I have a chance to regret what I've just agreed to, my phone starts to vibrate on the table. It's Mum. Again. She knows I'm doing a parents' evening tonight, so this can only mean that she's in trouble. Scooping up my phone, I apologise to the student and parents waiting to be seen next and rush outside to the corridor, mentally preparing myself for the latest disaster. Because things are only going to get worse.

'Thank God you're okay,' I say to Mum, wrapping her in my arms.

She seems surprised by my concern. 'Of course I'm okay, it was just a little accident, I'm not hurt.'

The kitchen windows are open, yet the smell of the charred tea towel won't dissipate. I imagine it will be days before it does. 'What happened, Mum? Are you sure you didn't turn the gas on?'

'No, I didn't. I'd made a cup of tea and went upstairs to the bathroom but when I came back down that tea towel was on fire. Spread over the hob, which was on. I have no idea how it turned itself on, but I definitely didn't do it. I had a sandwich for lunch so wouldn't have needed to use the cooker.' She rushes to the sink and lifts out a plate. 'See. This was my sandwich plate. Cheese and tomato. I would have had ham but I've run out.'

'But what about dinner?' I check my watch and it's nearly seven p.m.

'That's what I meant. I had a sandwich for dinner.'

I'm too relieved that she isn't hurt to question her about her meal choices. 'Oh, Mum. Thank goodness you're okay. That's all that matters.'

She places the plate back in the sink, even though she has a dishwasher and never washes by hand. 'You don't believe me, do you? You think there's something wrong with me!' She raises her voice.

'No, please calm down. I believe you, okay?'

'Good. Because I'm still your mother. I'm not a child and don't need to be patronised.'

'Okay, Mum, you're right. Shall I make some coffee?'

'No, thanks – I've just had one.'

I glance around the kitchen and there is no sign of a mug anywhere. It could be in the dishwasher, though. I mustn't assume that everything she says is untrue.

'It's a lovely evening, shall we go and sit in the garden?' I suggest, mainly so we don't have to inhale these fumes any more.

'Yes, good idea. I'll just get the back door key.'

She fumbles in her bag and pulls out her key ring. It's odd that she keeps the back door key on there; I'm sure she used to keep it separately in a kitchen drawer. Now's not the time to question her about it, though.

I don't know what compels me to check, but I pull the handle and find the back door unlocked.

Mum looks up. 'Oh, how strange. I can't remember when I went out that way last. Must have been this morning.'

Outside, we sit at the garden table, and Mum asks me about my day. She's chatting so normally that I begin to believe I've been worrying for nothing. We all forget things and make mistakes. Maybe I'm suffering from anxiety and it's causing me to think the worst about every situation?

'When are you and Aiden going to come for dinner?' Mum asks. 'I haven't seen him for ages.'

This is true, and it would be good for him to be around Mum for a bit, just to reassure me either way. 'I'll speak to him tonight. He's going to Edinburgh soon to stay with his parents for a few days. They need some help redecorating the house, and he hasn't seen them for ages.'

'Oh, that's nice. Lovely people, aren't they?' Mum says, smiling. 'Aiden's such a wonderful young man and it just goes to show what having a loving family can do for a child.'

It's as if she knows, even though I haven't told her we were considering adopting, and I know Aiden wouldn't have spoken to her either. 'Yes,' I say. 'It is. But it's not for everyone.'

She sighs. 'I worry about you, Eve. Oh, I know right now you're the one worrying about me, but it's been giving me sleepless nights to think of what you're going through.'

'We're doing okay, Mum. And I'm only thirty-one. I've still got time, haven't I?'

'You always did have such a positive outlook,' she says. 'You got that from your dad, I think. Oh, I wish he was here to see what an amazing young woman you've turned into.' Her eyes glisten. It's not often that she talks about Dad, but when she does it always chokes her up. 'Even when he was diagnosed with lung cancer – he carried on smiling, carried on working. He said he wasn't going to let that beat him. And he never once moaned about working with asbestos for all those years, even though that's what ended his life. What strength of character.'

'I miss him,' I say. As young as I was when he died, his absence has left a chasm within me that should have been filled with his huge personality.

'We both do.' She leans closer to me, as if she's about to tell me something confidential. 'Eve, you need to stop worrying about me and start thinking of yourself. I'm absolutely fine. There's nothing wrong with me at all. Just focus on you and Aiden and having that family you're both desperate for. Nothing else matters.'

We sit in the garden long after the sun has set, and I lose myself in Mum's words and thoughts. They are so strong and clear that I convince myself I have got this all wrong, that I have been worrying for no reason. Mum is fine.

She has to be.

Aiden's in bed when I get home, and despite my best efforts not to make too much noise and wake him, he stirs and opens his eyes. 'Is everything okay with your mum?'

I tell him about my visit, and even though he's looking at me, responding to my words, it feels as though he's only half present. I've really hurt him by not wanting to proceed with adoption.

‘At least she wasn’t injured,’ Aiden says, rolling onto his back. ‘Jackie’s a tough woman. She’ll be fine. It’s you I’m worried about.’

‘I’m fine. I’m always fine,’ I tell him, changing into my pyjamas.

Aiden watches me, lines creasing his forehead. ‘Come here.’ He lifts my side of the duvet and pulls me towards him. ‘We need to stick together in this, Eve. Otherwise I’m scared of what might happen to us. Things like this rip relationships apart, don’t they?’

I nod and cuddle into him. And when our bodies merge together I convince myself that this time will be it. That in this exact moment we are making our baby. The one who will stay with us.

NINE

Now

Someone has been in my flat. I can sense it. It smells different, a scent that doesn't belong to me and has no place in here.

It's other things too – subtle, barely perceptible. The TV remote control too close to the DVD player, the kettle too far from the wall. And in the bathroom, the hand soap is right next to the tap when I always leave it nearer the edge of the sink.

The email first, now this. What will be next?

Grabbing a knife from the kitchen drawer, I search the flat, and even though fear is coursing through me, I will not let it win.

But when the doorbell rings, I jump.

It will be Sophie, nobody else. I've invited her here and now she's come. I just need to focus on that. I quickly return the knife to the drawer then head to let her in.

The last thing I expect to see when I fling open the door is Jamie standing there, his hands in his pockets. I know disappointment must be carved into my face, but I'm powerless to suppress it. Jamie doesn't deserve this, but it's Sophie I need here. Everything depends on me getting through to her.

'Can we talk?' Jamie says, looking past me. If only this scrutiny was because he wants to make sure I'm not in the middle of a session, that there's no student here I need to get back to, but I know it's not that. Jamie might say he trusts me but he knows something is off; he just can't piece together what that is. He probably assumes I'm cheating on him.

I want to ask him if he's been in my flat today, but I know it won't have been him. 'It's really not a good time,' I say, scanning the street for any sign of Sophie. How would I explain to either of them who the other person is? This is complicated enough already. 'What if I come over later?' I tell Jamie. 'We can talk properly then. I can cook dinner or treat you to a takeaway?' I try to sound casual, as if I'm not desperate to hurry him off.

He hesitates, and these ticking seconds make me believe I might just get away with this.

‘No. We need to talk now, Eve. I’m sick of being brushed off.’ He folds his arms. ‘Are you going to let me in, then?’

I’ve never seen Jamie like this before and it doesn’t feel right. Again, I stare out at the street, where Sophie still hasn’t made an appearance. Perhaps she won’t come at all; she didn’t actually agree to be here at eight and it’s now twenty past. My hope dwindles and I reluctantly stand aside to let Jamie in.

As soon as we’re in the kitchen he wrinkles his nose. ‘It smells funny in here. Different.’

‘Probably one of my students,’ I say. So he’s noticed it, too. Confirmation that it’s not all in my mind – someone has been in my flat without me knowing. I turn my focus back to Jamie. ‘So how come you’re here? I thought we’d talked about everything the other night?’

Jamie’s eyes widen. ‘Really? That was talking? And I thought women were the ones who were supposed to overanalyse everything.’ He raises his hand. ‘No offence.’ When he sits down at my table he runs his fingers over the grooves in the wood, staring at them as if he finds them fascinating. He is nervous, his usual confidence missing in action.

‘You’re right, we do need to talk, Jamie, I just can’t do it now. Later, though. I’ll come over to you, I promise. We’ll sit down and talk about everything, for as long as we need to.’

‘Like I said—’

The doorbell rings, and we both freeze.

‘Oh, you’re expecting a student.’ Jamie stands. ‘Sorry, I’ll go.’

‘It’s not a student, it’s a friend.’

Before I can say another word he’s striding to the door, and just as I’m about to grab his arm to keep him back he stops himself. ‘Go on. Answer it, then. Don’t let me stop you.’

Again, this aggression is out of character for Jamie, but I don’t dwell on it because I’m too relieved that Sophie has come. I barely even care that I will now have to give both her and Jamie an explanation, because I am now one step closer to Kayla and ending this before it ends me.

Jamie’s shoulders drop when I open the door and he sees Sophie standing there instead of the man he no doubt expected.

‘Thank you so much for coming,’ I say, leaning forward to hug her. It’s an instinctual act, one I do without any thought, despite how things are

between us now. Sophie's body tenses and she barely moves her arms to respond to my embrace. Turning back to Jamie, I notice he is frowning.

I introduce them both, and they tentatively shake hands. Perhaps they both sense that this is an unusual situation, that none of us is comfortable.

'Jamie was just leaving,' I say.

He hesitates before finally moving towards the door. 'See you this evening then, Eve?' It feels like more of a demand than a question.

I nod and usher him out. As soon as I close the door behind him and am alone with Sophie, I notice how different she looks to when I saw her earlier in the park. Her hair is fluffier, as if it's just been washed, and hangs in loose waves around her shoulders. She's wearing what look like the same jeans, only this time she has on heels and a silky vest top with a deep V-neck. She still looked good in the park, but there is something different about her now, standing here alone without the twins hanging off her, more like the woman she was when I first met her.

'So, you did meet someone else then?' she says. '*Jamie.*'

'No, it's not like that. I've only known him for a few months. I didn't lie to you.'

She scans my hallway, and it's hard to read her expression; all I'm certain of is that she'll be trying to work out this new version of me. This is a small flat – definitely not suitable for more than one person – but it's in fairly decent condition and I try to make the best of the space.

'Do you own this place?' Sophie asks.

'No. It's rented. I left the house with Aiden, so there's no way I can buy my own place.'

'Well, leaving him the house is the least you could have done when you left him as the sole carer of your daughter.' She shakes her head. 'Sorry. On the way over here, I swore to myself I wouldn't give you a hard time like I did in the park. I came to hear your side of things.'

'Thank you,' I say. 'That means everything to me, Soph.'

In the kitchen, Sophie declines my offer of a drink, and I get myself a glass of water and sit with her at the table. Although she's promised she will hear me out, she leans forward, her shoulders hunched, and I know it's only a matter of time before she is on the attack again.

'You know I wanted Kayla more than anything, don't you? You remember everything Aiden and I went through before she came along?'

'Of course, and I was there with you every step of the way, wasn't I?'

‘Please just let me finish. You have to understand that this has nothing to do with our friendship. I valued that more than anything.’

She looks at me, opening her mouth but quickly closing it again. She’s ready to let me talk.

‘When Kayla was finally here, I... I just couldn’t handle everything.’

Her mouth opens again and she stares at me. ‘What do you mean? What exactly couldn’t you handle?’

The events that led me here flash through my head, and I shut them down. I can’t speak the words, relive them, make it all real. ‘I just couldn’t deal with my life any more, Sophie. I’m sorry I can’t explain it any better than that.’ There is no way I can tell her any more than this.

She shakes her head. ‘This is unbelievable. Are you trying to say you just didn’t want Kayla any more? That you had some kind of postnatal depression?’

Her words send me cold, but I have to confront this. ‘I don’t know what it was, Sophie. Maybe it was that.’

Again, she shakes her head. ‘Do you realise you’re not making this any better? If you want people to understand you then you have to explain more than that. Surely you can see that?’

‘Of course I can. It’s just... this is all I can give right now.’

‘Was it Aiden? You didn’t love him any more?’

‘No. It was nothing like that. I loved them both with every fibre of my being.’ That’s exactly why I had to go. I wish I could help Sophie see this.

‘Well, if you’re not able to explain it, people will just think you couldn’t be bothered with the hard work that comes with having a baby.’

Nobody matters except Kayla, Aiden, Mum and Sophie, though, so let people think what they will.

‘I realise that. Look, I know how terrible it was walking out and now I need to put things right. That’s all I care about.’

Sophie crosses her legs, and in this moment she looks just like she does when she’s about to give a student a lecture. ‘If you were struggling then why didn’t you talk to me? Or Aiden? You could have got help. You didn’t have to walk out. You were never a quitter before.’

The truth swims around my head, and I focus on that split second before it all could have been different. That’s all it took for everything to change. A second. And then there was no going back.

‘There is no excuse for what I did. None at all. I just need help to put it right.’

Sophie sighs. ‘The time for me to have helped would have been back then. Anyway, what is it you think I can do?’

Here goes nothing. ‘My plan is to talk to Aiden. On his own, just the two of us, but before I do I need you to tell me how things were after I left. I know this won’t be easy – for either of us – but I need to approach him in the right way, and, well, the truth is he’s a stranger to me now. I know nothing about his life, and I doubt he’s even the same person. Anything you could tell me would help.’

She frowns. ‘If you’re looking for some insight into how he might react then nothing I say will give you that. It’s impossible to know what Aiden will think or do. Only he knows that.’

‘I do understand that. I just want to be a mother to my little girl. And in order to do that I need to know how they’ve both been over the last two years.’ I move closer to Sophie and reach for her arm. She flinches but doesn’t pull away. ‘I’m so sorry to ask this of you, but there’s no one else who can help me.’

There is a long pause before she responds. ‘Aiden called me on the morning you disappeared. He thought that because you and I were so close I must know where you were, and it took a lot to convince him that I had no idea. He even accused me of lying, of covering up for you. Got quite confrontational and I’ve never known him to be like that.’ She shakes her head. ‘I understood, though. He was distraught and needed to lash out at someone I suppose. He was a complete mess when you walked out. Not only was he coping with a tiny baby, but his marriage had fallen apart and he had no idea why. Damien and I both had to go round there on that first morning to help him as he was in such a state.’

It crushes me to hear of Aiden’s suffering. I’ve been fully aware of the pain I would have caused him but hearing about it makes it more real. ‘I should have talked to him first. I know that now. But I wasn’t thinking clearly.’ How could I have been when my mind was clouded with fog? When nothing was right.

‘So where did you go?’ Sophie asks.

My body gives an involuntary shudder as I’m forced to recall those early days. I had no purpose, no goal, I was just existing. It was as if I didn’t belong in this world. ‘I drove down to Cornwall and stayed in a B & B. I

just needed to be away from everyone and everything. Believe me, I know how dreadful that sounds when I had a three-month-old baby at home, but I think I just blocked it all out.'

'Erased your life, you mean. Pretended your daughter didn't exist.'

'I know that's what it looks like,' I say, staring at the floor.

'Do you know how appalling that is?'

I nod. It's impossible to make Sophie see that I didn't have a choice, that I was protecting my family as best I could by leaving. There is no way she will understand that. 'There wasn't a single day that I didn't think about Kayla, though. I never forgot about her.' I stare at Sophie, and she's shaking her head, glaring at me as if I'm pure evil. I need to keep her talking about Aiden, rather than have her focus on me. I'm not ready for that. 'Did you stay in touch with Aiden after that?' I ask.

'Yes, a bit. His parents came down from Scotland for a few weeks. They couldn't stay much longer because of work commitments. It broke their hearts to have to leave him and Kayla, and they tried their best to convince him to move in with them for a while, but you know Aiden. He wanted to try to deal with it himself. There was no way he would leave London.'

I remember Aiden's parents' reaction when I had all the miscarriages. How his mum hugged me tighter than even my own mum, and that when we pulled away from each other her tears had soaked through my top, and I could feel them on my skin; she was feeling my pain as acutely as I was. 'Yes, they're lovely people,' I tell Sophie. Another bond I've managed to destroy. 'So what did Aiden do after that?'

'He coped, Eve. He sucked it up and dealt with the gaping hole you'd left. He might have fallen apart to begin with but he got used to it, and he's a great dad, despite what was thrown at him.'

'And you're still in contact now?'

'A little.'

'So you must know about Nicole Richardson then?'

Sophie stares at me. It's not often I ever witnessed her lost for words. 'How do you—'

'It doesn't matter. Do you know how long they've been together?'

Her forehead furrows. 'Around a year. Something like that. Look, sorry, Eve, but I'm getting a bit fed up of answering all these questions when you've barely said anything about why you left.'

It's only right that I should answer her questions, but I need to know one thing. 'Do they live together?'

Sophie rolls her eyes. 'What did you expect? You left him, Eve; he was bound to move on eventually.'

I haven't expected this. Finding out Aiden was with someone else, someone who would be in Kayla's life, was one thing; this feels like my insides are being torn apart because it might mean something worse. 'Does Kayla know about me? Does she know who I am, Sophie?'

Sophie takes so long to answer, and that in itself tells me all I need to know.

'I don't know. That's the truth, Eve. She was three months old. She wouldn't remember you, would she? You'd have to ask Aiden what he's told her.'

I believe Sophie. She's too much of a straight-talker to lie to me about this. Besides, it's not as if she'll be trying to protect my feelings.

She stands up and walks to my fridge. There's nothing stuck to it with magnets; no photos or pictures, or signs that anyone lives here. 'How about you actually answer some of my questions now?' she says. 'Where did you go after Cornwall? Did you get a teaching job?'

'I lived in Dorking in Surrey for a while, once I got my head together a bit. And I couldn't teach because I didn't want Aiden tracking me down.' I wait for her admonishment but it doesn't come. 'I did private tuition instead. Used my maiden name. Then I moved here over a year ago.'

'Why did you come back to London? It obviously wasn't to get Kayla back or you wouldn't have left it so long.'

'I couldn't get enough tutoring work, so I thought I'd have more students in London. I really had no choice, but it wasn't easy to do.'

'And you picked all the way on the other side of London. Nowhere near Kayla. What changed?'

So many things changed. *I* changed. 'I just couldn't be away from her any longer,' I tell Sophie.

She comes back to the table, slides into her chair. 'Aiden tried to find you. For months. You did a good job of disappearing. Your mum didn't even know where you were. Why would you do that to her?'

Mum. It was a few months before I went to see her, even though I'd been texting her to assure her I was okay. Explaining to her that I'd left my

family was one of the hardest things I'd ever had to do. Then her illness got worse and everything with me faded into the background.

'I'm not proud of that, Sophie.'

'None of this makes sense. A lot of people struggle with having a baby but they don't run away.'

'I know. Look, I really can't talk about this now, please understand that. I need to talk to Aiden first.'

Sophie reluctantly agrees and drops her questioning. She glances around my flat again. It's not in a bad state, but she'd probably consider it soulless and uninviting. There's barely any colour in here and nothing about it feels permanent. 'So, you think you can bring Kayla up here?' she asks. 'Is that your plan? To take her away from Aiden, after he's done everything for the last two years, and pull her away from all she knows?'

This is all I've thought about for months, but I can't let Sophie know that. 'No, of course not. I know that can't happen and I'd never want to cause her any more pain, but I need to be in her life, Sophie. In whatever way that's possible.'

'Good. Because she's nearly two and a half, and she'll be aware of so much. And Aiden won't let you just come in and say, "Hey Kayla, I'm your mum, come and live with me".'

'I know all this, Sophie, which is why I came to you for help.'

She ignores me. 'The three of them seem to have a good life together, and you can't just come and disrupt it. Aiden won't let that happen. He's been through too much already.'

Her words, although true, slice into my flesh. 'I just want to see Kayla. To be in her life in any way I can.'

'There's Nicole to think about too. I'm sorry, but it's true. She's a decent woman and she's an integral part of Aiden's and Kayla's life now, so you need to get your head around that.'

There is nothing I can say to this, because once again everything Sophie says is the truth. I know she's not saying it to be unkind, that's not who she is. Or who she *was* at least. I don't know her any more; I've just been assuming she's the same person, but everyone around me has been changed by my betrayal.

'I assume Nicole looks after Kayla when Aiden's at work?'

'Yes,' Sophie replies. 'And why does this feel like a police interrogation? Aiden's not the one who did anything wrong.'

‘I’m sorry. I just need information before I can speak to him. I need to know exactly what will be involved.’

‘Like I said before, it’s not something that can be planned like that, is it? There are people’s lives and feelings involved, and there’s no way to predict anything.’ She shakes her head. ‘I get it, Eve, you’re like me and need to be in control, to organise things and assess every possible outcome. It comes with being a teacher, but I just don’t think that will work in this case. If you’re going to do this, you need to do it carefully, and see what happens. I don’t think there’s anything more I can tell you, and to be honest, I don’t have a clue how Aiden will react. I really don’t.’

I stand up and walk to the window. Outside, the pavement is lit up by the street lights and it hardly looks like night time. When I first rented this place, I couldn’t get used to the kitchen overlooking the front of the building, when I’d been able to see the back garden from our family kitchen, but now I find it comforting. It eases my claustrophobia when I’m sitting at the table tutoring for hour after hour. It’s nice to glance up and see that the world outside still exists. Even if it’s a world in which nothing is right.

‘Don’t go to Aiden,’ Sophie is saying.

‘I have to. I need—’

‘Wait, just hear me out. Let me talk to him first. I think the news of you being back will be better coming from me. Less of a shock.’

I’m surprised by her offer and need a moment for it to sink in. I hadn’t considered this as an option and try now to visualise it. Half of me thinks that perhaps Sophie is right; the two of them have been in touch for these two years, so she might have a better chance of easing Aiden into this new situation than I would myself. But the other part of me believes this is my mess to clear up, so I am the one who needs to face Aiden. I try to explain this to Sophie.

‘Yes, all that’s true, but I think if you just turn up on his doorstep it might cause him even more pain. At least I can warn him, give him a chance to talk it through and get his head around it. Then the two of you can meet up and discuss everything.’ She sighs. ‘I’m just trying to look out for him, Eve. And *you*, actually. I can’t condone what you did, but I suppose you must have had your reasons, even if I don’t know what they are and none of it makes any sense.’

‘Thank you, Sophie.’ In the past I would have hugged her at a moment like this, but she seemed ill at ease with my earlier embrace so I don’t repeat that now.

‘You’d better give me your phone number so I can let you know what happens with Aiden.’

We exchange numbers, and Sophie stands up to leave. She’s been here such a short time that I want to ask her to stay, to promise her we can talk about anything, just like old times, but the words won’t leave my mouth. No matter how much I long for her company, for that window to the past to be opened permanently, I just have to be grateful she’s helping me at all. That will have to be enough for now. But something is telling me that Sophie’s not the person I used to know.

When I’m alone, I remember that someone has been in my flat.

Next time, I will be ready for them.

TEN

Before

It's been thirteen weeks now, and still I can't let myself believe that there's a baby growing inside me. Thirteen. That's an unlucky number, isn't it? So I spend the week waiting for it to happen, for the smallest sign of blood or anything else to show that this baby is no more, just like all the others. Why should this time be any different?

But it is. I know it as surely as I know my own name. I just don't want to admit it.

This time I've waited to tell Aiden; I would only be getting his hopes up, bringing that joy I usually love seeing on his face for nothing. But he knows something is wrong; I'm barely eating and spend most of the time I'm not working in bed. I need to tell him.

I do it over dinner – beef chilli, which Aiden has gone to a lot of effort to make – and watch as the hugest smile erupts on his face.

'Wait, say that again!' His eyes are wide with delight.

I can barely look at him. 'I'm pregnant. Fourteen weeks tomorrow. I've got a dating scan in the afternoon.'

'I can't believe it! Why didn't you tell me before?' He rushes over to me and folds me into him. 'You wanted to wait this time in case...'

Slowly I nod.

'Oh, Eve, this is amazing news. I was beginning to think it would never happen. Especially as we haven't—'

'Now you understand why?' I force myself to look at him. 'I just wanted to be careful.'

Aiden stands and walks round to me, kneeling down and resting his head on my lap. 'I was so worried... I thought... you've been so distant lately, and after all the adoption business, I was starting to think we wouldn't be okay.'

I stroke his hair, focus on the smooth strands that are out of place, try to block out all the thoughts that are exploding in my head.

He looks up at me. 'I know it will be difficult but we need to try to be positive. This is the furthest you've ever got, isn't it, so this baby is here to

stay.'

And that's exactly what I'm afraid of.

ELEVEN

Now

Three days have passed since Sophie suggested talking to Aiden for me. Seventy-two hours have never felt so long, and I plod along on autopilot, sick with anxiety, unable to focus on anything but my urgent need to be with my daughter. And the fact that I'm running out of time. There is a clock ticking; the emails are evidence of that. There's barely a moment when my eyes aren't glued to my phone, waiting for the next one, and now I'm also desperate for news from Sophie.

'I'm going up to the Lake District at the weekend,' Jamie is saying. 'To visit my parents. It's been so long since I've been to see them – life just seems to get in the way, doesn't it?'

'It's good that you're making time for them,' I say, staring out of the café window.

'Do you realise we've never actually done this before?' Jamie says.

I turn to him. 'What?'

'Met up for a coffee during the day. It's always evenings, isn't it?' He winks. 'This is nice, though. And it feels apt to be sitting in a coffee shop with you – together this time.'

Jamie's reference to how we met might make me return his smile, if I weren't so distracted. When I see how his face lights up with that smile, I realise that, despite everything, I want Jamie to be happy. That's what made me agree to meet up with him this afternoon, even though I'm about to crack open at any moment.

'Anyway, I was thinking,' he continues, 'maybe you could come with me?'

'To meet your parents?' I can't hide the horror on my face, and Jamie's happy expression quickly vanishes.

'Yeah. They're nice people, Eve, you'll love them. Have you ever been to the Lake District? It's amazing there. Especially if you're just used to this concrete jungle.' He gestures around us.

'I, um...'

‘Just say yes. Don’t overthink it. It’ll be nice. I think you could do with a break. I don’t know what’s been going on in your life but you seem... a bit stressed or something.’

‘I don’t know, Jamie.’

‘Look, I don’t know what will happen with us, if there even can be an *us*, but it could just be a weekend away. A break for you. Don’t think of it as meeting my parents; we’d just be staying with them. Or we could do a hotel if you don’t want to stay at their house?’

I’m about to say it’s probably not a good idea when I see a familiar figure across the road. Although I’m instantly aware that it’s someone I know, it takes me a moment to work out that it’s Maya, my pregnant student. It always takes me by surprise when I see a student outside of a tutoring session, or outside of school when I used to work in one, almost as though they don’t exist in any other setting.

She’s standing in the middle of the pavement, having what seems like an argument with a boy. He’s gesticulating wildly, and Maya is shouting at him, her own face creased in anger. I’ve never witnessed her like this before and I wonder if I ought to go to check she is okay, but before I can move she is walking away, leaving the boy standing there shaking his head.

‘So that’s a yes, then?’ Jamie is saying, oblivious to what’s happening outside.

I nod, without remembering what I’m agreeing to, because right now all my focus is on Maya.

‘Great! I’ll let them know we’re coming.’

As I turn back to Jamie, it sinks in that I’ve just agreed to spend the weekend at his parents’ house. Miles away from Kayla. ‘I, um—’

His phone rings, and with a quick apology he rushes to answer it.

I whisper that I’ll be back in a minute and leave the café to see if there’s any sign of Maya. She’s long gone, though, and so is the boy she was arguing with. I check my appointments on my phone and see that she’s not due a session until Friday. I text her and ask if she’s okay, explaining that I’ve just seen her in the high street, and that I’m here if she needs to talk.

Back inside the café, Jamie has finished his call and is at the till paying for our drinks. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says when he spots me, ‘emergency at work, I have to go.’

‘Don’t worry.’

He kisses my forehead. 'I'll call you later. So glad you're coming next weekend,' he says, and then he has gone, and I'm left wondering how I just agreed to this when Kayla is slipping further away from me.

'What are you doing here?' Sophie asks. Her tone isn't unkind, just fused with shock at the sight of me standing on her doorstep when she is the one who was meant to contact me.

'I'm sorry, but I've been going out of my mind. I know you, Sophie, and I know you will have spoken to him by now, so what aren't you telling me?' As I stare at her, I feel certain that I cannot trust her; how can I when I don't even know if I can trust myself?

'You'd better come in,' she says. 'The twins are in bed, and Damien's out with his work friends.'

Stepping into Sophie's house after all this time is like travelling back in time. Not much has changed; it's still got Sophie's stamp all over it, her way of matching colours, picking the decorative accessories that perfectly complement each room. She always used to joke that if she ever got fed up of teaching she'd go into interior design.

'He won't see me, will he?' As soon as I've said it, I know it's the truth. I've spent so many hours imagining my first conversation with Aiden, planning to defend myself, that it never occurred to me that Aiden might refuse to see me.

'I'm sorry.' Sophie heads to the living room, and I follow her, surprised to find toys scattered all over the floor, even though the twins must have gone to bed a while ago.

'What did he say?'

She starts clearing away the mess, only stopping when I grab her arm.

'Please, Sophie, just talk to me.'

'I decided to ask him to meet me for a drink. I thought it might be better if I spoke to him in person. We used to meet for drinks sometimes after... you know.' She waits for my reaction, as if I might object.

'Okay. What happened?'

She sighs. 'Oh, I don't know if I handled it right at all. I mean, it's not a normal kind of situation, is it? There's no advice anywhere for how to deal with something like this.' She looks flustered, out of her comfort zone. I'd

always thought that nothing could faze her. Unless there is another reason her usual confidence is absent.

‘Aiden seemed on edge even before we started talking, so looking back, maybe it wasn’t the right time. I began by asking if he ever thought about you.’

I don’t want to hear the answer to this.

‘He said that yes, he did. Even though he tried not to, every time he looked at Kayla he saw you in her. Those were his words, Eve.’

My breath catches in my throat. I haven’t been expecting this. All signs pointed to Aiden having completely eradicated any sign or thought of me from his life. *But not our daughter. She is always there.*

‘Then I just came straight out with it and told him that I’d seen you. He fell completely silent. I mean, for ages. He just didn’t seem to know what to say. I really hated being the one to do that to him.’ She stares at her feet. ‘I care about him, Eve. He and I became close when you left. Good friends. I don’t want to see him hurt, and I definitely don’t want to be the one to hurt him.’

‘It’s not you who’s done anything to him,’ I offer. ‘Only me.’

She shakes her head. ‘I’m involved now, though, aren’t I? Anyway, eventually he just said he didn’t want to know. He said you were in the past and he had a new life now. That was it.’

It is a shock to find out that Aiden didn’t ask any questions, didn’t need the huge gaps to be filled in. ‘And what did you say?’

‘I tried to defend you, Eve. I know that’s hard to believe after how I reacted to seeing you, but I did my best. I told him everyone deserved a second chance. And do you know his response? He told me quite calmly that this isn’t true – that murderers, for one, don’t deserve a second chance, and neither do people who can be cruel enough to walk away from their babies.’

I try to push aside the hurt I feel at being compared to a murderer by the man I once loved. Who once loved me. ‘Maybe Aiden’s right,’ I say. ‘But this isn’t just about giving me a chance. This is about giving Kayla a chance to know her mother.’

Sophie holds up her hands. ‘A mother doesn’t walk away from her child.’ She turns from me and begins clearing the toys away, piling them into a basket in the corner of the room.

I ignore her comment, storing it away to analyse later. 'I just want to see Kayla. She's the only person who matters.'

Sophie sighs. 'Maybe Aiden just needs some time to get his head around it all. I did just spring it on him. Like I said, I think I handled it all wrong. So, what will you do now?'

'I'm not sure. But I'm not giving up, Sophie. I know this will sound strange, because I'm the one who left, but being away from her for these years has almost killed me.'

Sophie frowns at me, trying to work out the enigma that I am, that this whole situation is.

She must see that I will do whatever it takes to have my daughter in my life, and neither she nor Aiden are going to stop me. And now, this is more important than ever.

TWELVE

Before

‘We’ve done it,’ Aiden says.

I turn to him. ‘Don’t say that. She’s not out yet.’ Inside me, the baby wriggles, showing her defiance. Despite everything I’m saying to Aiden, I believe she is determined to be here, that nothing will stop her coming into the world.

‘Well, they’re taking us down in a few minutes and the C-section won’t take too long, so I reckon we could be meeting her in less than an hour.’ His mouth spreads into a grin. He’s so excited, and I desperately want his enthusiasm to infect me, to seep into my body and fill me up, but all I feel is numb.

This baby is overdue; they’ve tried everything to encourage her out, including inducing me, and nothing has worked. So now they’re going to slice me open and pull her out. I shudder at the thought, even though I know I won’t feel anything, and that in some ways this is the better option. Right now, I feel as though I’d never be able to push her out, that my whole body would shut down and refuse to do anything – and then what would happen to both of us?

‘I know you’re worried,’ Aiden continues. ‘And you will be until you’re holding her in your arms, but I promise you, everything will be okay.’

He can’t promise me this, though, can he? This is not something he can control. And now his words are making me feel even worse. Devoid. As if there is nothing left of me. *It’s hormones, it must be. That’s what’s making me feel this way. Soon she will be here and everything will be okay. Nothing else will matter once I’m holding her in my arms.*

‘Did I tell you that your mum’s on her way?’ Aiden says. ‘I thought I’d better warn her that she wouldn’t be allowed in yet. I told her to take her time and wait for visiting hours.’

I’d forgotten about that. All morning I’ve been looking forward to Mum being here, to see her holding her granddaughter. Like a young child I’m praying that my mum being here will make everything okay. ‘Was she all right with that? I know how desperate she is to meet this baby.’

‘Yeah. Actually, she said she had some things to do first so it could be early evening before she gets here.’

She won’t have told Aiden what it is she needs to do, so I don’t bother asking. Mum seems to have become increasingly more secretive over the last few months, and I have to force even the most trivial bits of information from her. ‘Oh, don’t worry about me,’ she insists. ‘You’re pregnant, you’ve got loads on your plate, just focus on you and Aiden.’ Whenever she’s said this, I’ve wanted to tell her that I need something else to focus on, more than anything.

The midwife comes to take us to the theatre. She’s cheerful and bubbly and just about everything I don’t need right now because her smiling and joking might just tip me over the edge. ‘Are you ready to meet your baby?’ She beams, and I force myself to appear happy, as if this is the most amazing day of my life.

Aiden clutches my hand, and I try to focus on the only thing that matters. We are about to become parents. Then everything will be okay. It has to be.

‘Here she is.’ The doctor holds her up over the blue curtain and, beside me, Aiden gasps. Her arms and legs are crossed, and she looks like a little Buddha, silently praying. It’s a few seconds before she cries, and in that time, I imagine that no sound will ever leave her tiny body, that she will remain silent forever.

Aiden strokes my arm and kisses me on the forehead. If I had the energy, I would push him away. ‘You did it, Eve, you did it!’

But what did I do? I only lay here while on the other side of the curtain two doctors cut me open and pulled her out, all the time talking to each other so casually as though what they were doing was akin to cooking a meal. They are the ones who *did it*.

A voice in the room calls out the time. It’s hard to know to whom it belongs because there are so many people in here. *Twelve minutes past three*. I think I’m supposed to always remember this time, to commit it to memory so that I can remind her on every birthday that this is the time she arrived in the world.

‘Isn’t she cute?’ Aiden says while they place her on the scales to check her weight. ‘I know I’m biased but she really is.’

‘Seven pounds seven.’ Another voice speaking, yet another thing I’m supposed to remember.

‘Yes,’ I tell Aiden. ‘So cute.’ Maybe I’m just saying this because I’m supposed to. The truth is, I don’t actually know what she is or how I feel.

The bouncy midwife places her on my chest, delivering a speech about the importance of skin-to-skin contact. ‘Does she have a name yet?’ she asks. If she smiles any harder her face might crack open.

‘Kayla,’ I manage to say, forcing myself to smile, too, making myself look at my baby. That’s it. That’s all I have to do. Acknowledge the correct behaviour and force myself to do it.

‘Kayla Rose Conway,’ Aiden adds, squeezing my hand.

While I’m still in the hospital, I am protected. All I need to focus on is trying to establish feeding. I haven’t even had to change a nappy yet; the midwives just float in and do it every hour or two – they don’t even ask if I’d like to have a go. I should ask if I can try myself, insist on it even. That’s what most mothers would do, and I need to prove that I’m okay. That I’m normal.

‘It’s not working,’ I tell the new midwife who’s taken over from the smiley one. She’s not nearly as friendly and seems tired, even though she’s only just come on shift.

‘Don’t worry, it takes time,’ she assures me.

I’ve been trying to pump breast milk for over twenty minutes and haven’t seen a single drop of anything, not even colostrum. They keep telling me how important it is to give this to the baby, and all that’s doing is making me feel like a failure. Like I’ve let Kayla down already when she’s only a few hours old. This is what it’s going to be like; me constantly letting her down.

‘We’ll try again in a little while,’ she says. ‘In the meantime, she can have another bottle.’ Without even asking me she opens the curtain and leaves to prepare some formula. Why are they doing everything for me? Don’t they realise that they’re just leaving me clueless?

I glance at the woman in the bed next to me and see her little baby snuggled into her chest, happily feeding. It’s just me then. I’m the only one who can’t get to grips with this.

‘Here we go,’ the midwife says as she returns. ‘Would you like to have a go?’ She’s already handing me the bottle and picking Kayla out of her bassinet.

I can’t. ‘Could you please do it?’

She doesn’t say anything but stares at me before finally picking up Kayla and effortlessly feeding her while standing up.

Aiden comes back from the coffee shop downstairs and hands me a large latte. Throughout this pregnancy I’ve avoided caffeine, done everything I’m supposed to do, but now I will enjoy it.

‘No luck yet then?’ Aiden asks.

‘It takes time,’ the midwife says before I can answer. Maybe she’s nicer than I thought. She finishes feeding Kayla and silently places her on my chest. I stare at my baby and wonder why she doesn’t feel like mine at all. How is that possible when I carried her for all this time, when I was so desperate to hold a baby in my arms? And now she’s here all I want to do is pass her to Aiden, or the midwife. To anyone who will have her.

‘I’ll have to get going in a minute,’ Aiden says when the midwife has left us to it. ‘I’ve only got an hour to get to the airport to pick up Mum and Dad.’

I listen to Aiden tell me about the people who have passed on their best wishes, my mind completely empty. I’m scared of him leaving me alone with Kayla, but also relieved when he kisses me goodbye promising to be back soon. At least now I don’t have to pretend.

When he’s gone, I turn on my side and try to rest. Kayla is asleep in the bassinet next to me, and I watch her, waiting to feel something.

On the table by my bed, my phone vibrates. I consider ignoring it but it could be Mum, or Aiden. Reaching across, I look at the screen and see it’s a text message from a number I don’t recognise.

Even before I click on it, I already know who it’s from, but still I check, just to be sure.

And then I press delete.

THIRTEEN

Now

Standing outside Aiden's office in Ealing makes me feel as though no time has passed. As if it could just be one of those evenings when I'd come to meet him after I left the school, and we'd both share our days with each other. When I was training to teach, my tutor told us that nobody understood the life of a teacher like another teacher, but he was wrong. Aiden always understood. He got it when I'd had a hard day and needed to offload, and he'd listen while I'd sometimes talk for hours about something I was struggling with. Yet now things couldn't be more different, and I am the last person he will want to see waiting for him.

With no idea what time he'll leave the building, I sit on a wall in the car park, hoping he still leaves at around six p.m., just as he used to. I'm prepared to wait all night if I have to.

'What the hell are you doing here?'

Aiden is marching towards me, his face red and his eyes slits of pure anger.

Quickly I stand. 'Can we just talk? That's all I'm asking.'

He stops when he reaches me. 'Over two years. You turn up after this long and think we can just talk? Leave me alone, Eve, I've got nothing to say to you.'

He's about to walk off but I grab his arm. The feel of him is alien to me now, even after all our years together; it could be a stranger I'm grabbing hold of. He swipes his arm away but I have to believe that somewhere, deep inside him, is the man who once loved me. Or at the very least, a man who will want some answers.

The scowl on his face distorts him, makes him a stranger. 'What do you want? You must want something after all this time, otherwise you wouldn't be here. So what is it?' I have never heard Aiden speak this aggressively.

'I just want to talk. Please. Just give me a few minutes of your time.'

'You know you don't deserve that, don't you?' His eyes bore into me.

'I'm Kayla's mother and I won't go away. Don't you think it's better if we can just talk?'

Aiden sighs and his skin reddens. He wasn't often stressed, but on the few occasions when I witnessed it, his face would do exactly this. Some things never change. 'How did you get here?' he asks.

'I got the Tube, why?'

'I need a bloody drink. There's a bar a short walk from here.' He stalks off, not once turning back to check whether or not I'm following.

While Aiden gets the drinks, I find a table and sink into a chair. Every inch of my body is pulsating with anxiety, but at least he's agreed to talk to me. This is progress.

He sits down, and it hits me that nothing I say will be good enough, no apology big enough, to make any amends for what I did. I try to explain this to him.

'Why?' he asks. 'That's what I've been asking myself all this time. Why would you do it? Especially after everything we went through before finally having her.' He lifts his drink and stares at it, swilling it around. 'All this time I thought there must be another man, even though I couldn't believe you'd ever do that to me. To anyone. Sophie assured me there wasn't. And at least *she* can be trusted. So that just leaves a big fat question mark.'

'I left because I couldn't handle it, Aiden. My life. Any of it.'

He stares at me, clearly disgusted. 'You wanted a baby more than anything. Four miscarriages, Eve. All that grief. I don't understand.'

And you never fully will. Because all I can do is give you just enough to hope that you will have a small inkling of an idea why I had to go. The rest is too monstrous, too toxic to share with anyone.

I look around and this place is full of people enjoying the company of others, engrossed in casual, light-hearted conversations. I'm willing to bet nobody is discussing anything as dark and twisted as Aiden and I are.

'I know it was awful, and I live with that knowledge every single day.' I wish I could add that it follows me around, hovers over me like a thick cloud about to burst and there's no shelter from it. Maybe it would help Aiden get inside my head, but I only say, 'I had to leave, Aiden. I just couldn't stay. Not then. I'm not here to make excuses, just to see if we can move forward somehow.'

He picks up his glass and takes another long swig of what looks like gin or vodka. 'That's not an answer. I have no words for you. If only you knew what a beautiful, amazing little girl Kayla is. You left her without a mother, and whatever your reasons, that's unforgivable. I'm just glad she doesn't remember you. She knows nothing about you.' He turns away from me, cannot bear to look me in the eye.

'I understand why—'

'You don't understand anything, Eve.' He raises his voice, and an elderly couple seated near us turn to stare. Oblivious to their frowns, Aiden continues. 'What do you want? To have Kayla back? Well, that's not going to happen. There's no way I'll let you do any more damage to her, just because you suddenly feel ready to be a mother. It's two years too late for that.' More people turn to stare at us.

'I know I hurt you,' I tell him, my own voice barely more than a whisper; I'm hoping if I speak quietly then he will do the same. 'Tell me what I can do to make things right. Please. I'll do anything.'

'There's only one thing that will make things better. Staying away from us. Will you do that?' Now he does look at me, fixing his eyes on me in a staring contest.

'I... I need to see her, Aiden. Please. There must be a way we can work this all out. I'm not trying to take her away from you, but can I just see her?' I have never begged for anything before but here I am, laying my soul on the line.

He shakes his head and downs the rest of his drink. 'I'm going to the toilet.'

I hope that while he's gone he'll see sense in agreeing to my request. I check my phone to pass the time. Maya has only just replied to the text I sent her earlier, assuring me she's fine. Then almost immediately she sends another message, asking if she can come for a session tomorrow afternoon. I reply yes to this and am about to follow up to ask if she's sure she's okay when Aiden returns.

'I need some fresh air,' he says. Once again, with no invitation for me to follow, he stalks off.

My heart sinks. He needs more time, and even though time is something I cannot afford to give him, for all our sakes, I know that pushing him might mean I lose Kayla for good. I've been fully prepared to go to extreme measures to get her back but having Aiden on my side is the much better

option. Gathering my jacket and bag, I head after him. He walks so fast that by the time I've got outside he's already crossing the road.

'Aiden, wait!'

He turns around. 'I can't do this, Eve. I... don't know how to do this.'

And then he is gone, leaving me behind. 'Just let me see my daughter!' I scream into the night, but there is no reply.

FOURTEEN

Now

‘Are you okay, miss?’

I turn to Maya, who is chewing the end of her pen and staring at me instead of working on her essay plan as she’d been doing before my thoughts pulled me away from here. I’ve been picturing myself last night, standing outside Aiden’s house once again – only metres away from my daughter – so close to hammering on that door. In the end I couldn’t go through with it. I don’t know what I will do yet, all I know is that it’s already taking too long, the situation getting more desperate.

I force a smile. ‘I’m fine, Maya. How’s that essay plan going?’

‘You just look... pale? Yellow. Sick or something.’

She won’t be used to seeing me without make-up on; every day I make some effort, even if nobody is going to see me. Today, though, I just couldn’t face it. I assure Maya I’m fine, but she continues to stare at me, frowning, trying to work out what’s going on.

‘I think I’ve finished,’ she says after a few minutes, sliding her paper across to me.

‘Okay, good.’ I stare at her neat round writing but the words just blur into each other. She hasn’t written enough for the question to have been properly addressed, but I will deal with that later. ‘We can go through it all next session.’ I place it in my folder. ‘You said you wanted to talk to me. Is this about what I saw yesterday?’

She hangs her head. ‘That was Connor. I told him I can’t keep this baby, and he kicked off, right in the street in front of everyone. It was awful!’

I knew Maya was unsure about her pregnancy, and yet hearing her say this with such conviction is a shock. I must respect her decision, though, and I, more than most people, know what she could face if she has this baby without being one hundred per cent sure. And even if she is sure, there are no guarantees about anything.

‘Do you think I’m a terrible person? To not want it?’

‘No, not at all. As I’ve said before, this decision has to be yours, nobody else can tell you what to do. You have to do what’s right for you, Maya.’

These words are flowing from my mouth, but my head is screaming at her to give this baby a chance, that one day she might regret her decision.

The relief on her face shows me just how much she doesn't want this baby, that nothing will sway her, and that she is desperate for someone to be in her corner. 'Connor just doesn't get it. He thinks we can do it and live happily ever after. He told me it's wrong to have a termination. That it's murder.'

'Well, people have different opinions about it, but it's your body. He is the father, though, Maya, so maybe you shouldn't be so hard on him?' *Like I was on Aiden, not giving him a choice in anything.*

'I tried to talk it through properly and tell him exactly how I felt, and he seemed okay to start with, but then he changed his mind and went bat-shit crazy.' She smacks her mouth. 'Oh, sorry for swearing.'

'Have you talked to your parents yet?'

'No. I'm not keeping the baby, so they don't need to know. That would just mean two more people trying to force me to keep it. I don't need that pressure, miss. I want to travel this summer. Visit places other than London. There's a huge world out there and so far I've seen none of it. How can I do that if I have this baby?'

'Like I said, you have to do what's right for you. I can't agree with you not telling your parents, though.'

'I'm eighteen, miss, I'm not a kid.'

'I know that, and it's up to you who you tell. Look, maybe you shouldn't be talking to me about this? I'm your tutor. I don't know if it's appropriate.' *It's too late to tell her this now – you are already involved.*

Her eyes widen, and for a second she looks like a young child, not someone who should be weighing up the choice about becoming a mother. 'You said you'd help me.'

'I know, Maya, and I meant it. I'll support you in any way I can,' I tell her.

'Then can you please just listen to me and let me talk?'

'Yes, of course,' I say, because what else can I do? 'So have you spoken to Connor since the argument?'

She shakes her head. 'He's been messaging me loads but I haven't replied. I just feel like I need to be left alone a bit. Like this is my problem to deal with.'

'Okay. You're not worried about what he'll do, are you?'

‘No, he wouldn’t try to hurt me or anything. He’s not like that.’

I tell her I’m glad to hear that, and she begins clearing away her things. ‘I’ve actually found a clinic and have an appointment next week. I just want this done before my exams.’ Her words are so cold and clinical. Is that how I was when I decided to leave? Is that how I *had* to be?

The exams are looming. And after that Maya will no longer need tutoring.

‘Please be sure,’ I say to her as she leaves. ‘That’s all I ask.’

‘If you think about it, miss – how can we ever be really sure about any huge decision we make? There’s always that alternative road, isn’t there? I’ve been thinking about this. It’s like there are two of me. One is going off to university to study for her degree, while the other one is going to be a young mum. They’re both valid choices, aren’t they? I just have to make one decision and stick with it. That’s all I can do.’

She waves goodbye and leaves me standing at my door, watching her head down the street. Although I admire her ability to think philosophically about this, I call her name, planning to tell her that she’s wrong, that there is a third option, one where she gets to do both things. She doesn’t hear me and disappears around the corner before I can call her name again.

There is no way I can let Maya make a mistake like my own. I quickly grab my trainers from the hallway, not bothering to tie the laces.

Rushing outside, I don’t notice the woman walking towards me until I’ve rammed into her, almost sending her crashing to the ground. Her large handbag flies from her shoulder and lands on the pavement, scattering some of the contents.

‘I’m so sorry, I—’ My words stop short when I take in the familiar features of this woman.

Nicole Richardson.

And she’s outside my flat, scooping down to gather up her belongings.

She looks up at me, her bright blue eyes huge and kind, showing no annoyance at the fact that I’ve nearly knocked her over. ‘Please don’t worry, I should have moved out of the way when I saw you rushing.’ She smiles. ‘You’re Eve, aren’t you?’

I only manage a nod; shock has rendered me speechless.

‘I’m Nicole, Aiden’s partner. I’m so sorry to turn up like this but do you think we could talk?’ Standing up, she pulls her bag back onto her shoulder. ‘I know this is a bit of a shock,’ she says, ‘and I really hope it’s okay that

Sophie gave me your address. Please don't be angry with her, she was just trying to help after the state Aiden was in last night when she came over.' She pauses and takes a deep breath. 'Basically, I'm here because all that matters is Kayla's well-being. We all need to do what's right for her, don't we? I've gone over this in my mind and I can't see how keeping you away from her will be good for her in the long run. Aiden doesn't agree, and I totally understand his feelings, but, well, Kayla has to come first here.'

I stare at this woman, convinced I must be mistaken. This can't be Nicole Richardson – Aiden's new partner and the woman who has been raising my daughter – standing here telling me that I shouldn't be prevented from seeing Kayla. I turn to look in the direction Maya left, of course she is long gone now, and half expect to be alone when I turn back.

But Nicole is still there, right in front of me. And even though I've already seen her from a distance, and her picture on Facebook, close up she is nothing like I've imagined. Her long hair is much lighter – almost a reddish blonde – and she's taller than I assumed she'd be, at least two inches taller than me. We are nothing alike. Clearly Aiden doesn't have a type. Either that or he's made a conscious effort to find someone who bears no resemblance to me.

It takes me a few moments to gather my thoughts, and now that I have, the main thing running through my head is that this woman is the key to bringing Kayla and me together.

I smile to show her my gratitude. 'Does Aiden know you've come?'

She shakes her head. 'No. And I really don't like lying to him, but there's too much at stake here – mainly Kayla's well-being – so I had to weigh up my choices.' She glances up at my building. 'Look, I'm a complete stranger so I'm sure you don't want me in your flat. Is there somewhere near here we could go and talk?'

'There's a park a few minutes away with an outdoor café area. It's not usually busy during the week. We could go there?'

'Perfect,' Nicole says. 'And thank you for talking to me.'

'No, it's me who should be thanking you,' I say as we walk. 'This situation is just... well, difficult is putting it too mildly, so I appreciate you talking to me. If you don't mind me asking, how did you meet Aiden?'

She hesitates, and I wonder if I've crossed a line. 'We met at his work,' she says. 'I was on a long-term temporary contract there as a PA to the managing director. It's a funny place there, people aren't too friendly, so I was always having lunch on my own. Until Aiden took pity on me and sat with me one afternoon.' She smiles, clearly recalling a positive memory. 'I suppose we just hit it off, and I was eternally grateful that he'd made working there a bit more bearable. I mean, it's fine if you're at the top like Aiden, but I was just a temp and clearly at the bottom of the heap, so wasn't worthy of anyone's time. Even my own boss made no effort to make me feel comfortable.'

That sounds just like Aiden. He never liked to see anyone lonely or unhappy. I almost say this to Nicole but don't want her to think I still have any residual feelings for him. She needs to know that all I'm interested in is seeing my daughter. And quickly.

'I'm glad he found you,' I say, meaning every word.

Her forehead creases. 'Thanks. Anyway, it was quite a long time before we got together. He just wasn't looking for a relationship, and neither was I.' She pauses. 'No, I definitely wasn't but that's another story. Well, eventually Aiden and I were just such good friends and it felt so natural for our relationship to progress.' She slows down and turns to me. 'Sorry, I'm sure you don't want to hear all this.'

'I'm just grateful we can talk. Aiden was not ready, or able, to hear anything I had to say. I do understand but I need him to give me a chance.'

She nods. 'Well, it's not going to be easy. None of this is. Is that the park? I could really do with a drink. It's so warm, isn't it? Funny, we moan all winter for a bit of sun and a decent summer, and then as soon as we get one we complain that it's too hot.'

As I listen to her talking, somehow, despite everything, I think I like this woman.

Nicole offers to buy us drinks, but I rush forward to the counter. 'No, I insist. This is the least I can do.'

She asks for an orange juice while I opt for a mineral water.

'Please don't think I let Kayla drink juice,' she says. 'It's strictly water at home and only juice as an occasional treat when we're out.'

'You really don't have to explain anything like that to me,' I tell her, but I'm pleased that she has. 'I can tell she's a healthy and happy little girl.'

Nicole frowns, and I immediately realise my error. I could try and cover it up but I won't lie to her, especially not after she's making this effort. 'I should explain. I saw you with her going to the park the other day. I was never going to approach her but I'd just gone to your house, just to see where she was living. It was purely coincidental that you were both heading to the park at that time. I really hope you believe that. I just... needed to see some part of her life, to feel close to her in some way. There's no way I would have introduced myself.'

Any minute now she will stand up to leave, tell me I need to get some help. Instead, though, Nicole turns to me. 'I do understand that, Eve. I may not have children of my own yet but I can imagine that bond you must have as a mother never goes away. No matter what. You'll get no judgement from me. I just want what's best for Kayla. And Aiden, of course.'

We make our way to an empty table and bench.

'Sophie explained a lot to me,' Nicole says as we sit down. 'And she really defended you when Aiden was refusing to hear anything, so I know you had your reasons for leaving. I respect Sophie a lot, and I've come to think of her as friend, so I know she wouldn't take your side without good reason. Not when we've become so close.'

I'm surprised to hear this. Sophie led me to believe that they weren't in a great deal of contact, but I can't hold it against her for playing their friendship down. 'I know how it looks to other people, and how it *is*. I did a terrible thing by walking out on my baby and nothing will justify that, but all I can do now is try to make up for it, and I'll do whatever I can to put things right. I'm fully aware that it's not something that can be easily fixed, but if we can all just communicate then maybe we'll find a way?' As I say this, I realise how many times I've had to repeat those words in the last few days.

She sighs. 'I can't make you any promises but I'll try to talk to Aiden.'

'Maybe he just needs some more time?' I suggest. 'This has all come out of the blue and must be a bit of a shock for him. You know him better than I do now. Do you think he'll come around?'

Nicole curls her lip. 'He's a reasonable man, so I would say, yes. Just give him a bit of time.'

'Thank you. I can't tell you how much it means to me that you're willing to help me for Kayla's sake. It's more than I could ever have expected.'

‘My mum always used to say to me, “Be kind to other people – that’s the most important thing in life, then everything else will just fall into place.” Kind of like karma, I suppose. I try to put out into the universe what I’d like to get back, and that’s to be treated with kindness.’ She stares into the distance. ‘Unfortunately, sometimes it doesn’t always work, but, hey, we can’t control other people’s actions, can we?’

As I study this woman, it’s hard to believe that anyone would treat her with anything other than kindness. It might be understandable if I, in particular, felt something negative towards her, when she is a woman who knows my daughter inside and out, more than I ever will. Right now, though, all I feel towards her is warmth and gratitude. Being here shows that she must really love Kayla.

‘You’re taking a risk, Nicole. If Aiden finds out you’ve come to see me then he’d... well, I can only imagine being betrayed is not something he deals with well. I’m grateful you’re trying to help but perhaps I should just try to get through to him on my own. I don’t want this wrecking your relationship.’

Nicole smiles. ‘Thanks, but I’m doing this because it’s what I believe in, even though it’s not going to be easy for Aiden, or me. Kayla needs to have you in her life, so I’ll do my best to help Aiden see that. As I said before, I can’t make you any promises but I’ll try.’

‘Thank you.’

She reaches into her bag and pulls out her mobile. ‘Would you like to see some pictures of Kayla?’

My eyes widen. ‘Really? Are you sure?’

She nods. ‘The only thing is, I might be in a lot of them with her, but if you’re okay with that? I do love a selfie!’

There’s no space in my head to wonder how I feel about this – I can only focus on seeing my daughter.

Nicole begins tapping the screen. She stares at it for a few moments, swiping sideways before finally holding it up to me. ‘Here she is. Isn’t she beautiful?’

I stare at the picture and my body seems to fill with joy and pain simultaneously. In the photo I’m looking at, Kayla’s dressed in a red pinafore dress and is throwing her head back and laughing at something. Looking at her, I am overwhelmed with the feeling that she is my baby, yet

she also feels like a complete stranger. As though she could belong to anyone.

Nicole swipes the screen and a new photo appears – in this one she is there with Kayla, their faces pressed together, both of them pulling goofy expressions. This time I feel the physical pain as though I'm being stabbed through the chest. I lean forward, hoping Nicole won't notice anything is wrong. I can't let her think this is a problem for me, not when she's doing so much to help.

'She's such a happy child.' This is all I can manage to say.

Nicole puts her phone in her bag. 'I know this must be hard for you, and to be honest, it's a little weird for me too.'

'Yes, it must be. You've been bringing her up for around a year so she must feel like...'

'Like she's mine?' She pauses. 'I don't try and pretend she is or anything like that, but when you spend every day with someone and are responsible for their well-being, well, it's hard not to get attached.'

I nod, even though the weight of her words crushes me. Of course it would be like this; how could it be any other way?

'Also, I'm so sorry to say this but it's better if I just come out with it.'

Every part of me wants her to stop. To not say whatever it is she's about to. Ignorance is supposed to be bliss, isn't it?

'I'm really sorry but Kayla calls me mummy.'

FIFTEEN

Before

Aiden's gone to work – his paternity leave over in what felt like seconds rather than weeks. I'm sitting on the sofa, in my milk-stained pyjamas, holding Kayla on my shoulder in an attempt to get her comfortable. Nothing is working this morning and she's wriggling and moaning, unhappy with any position I hold her in.

There's a baby music class this afternoon. I should take her to that, try to get a grip on myself and whatever it is I'm experiencing. *But I won't because I can't. There is no way I will manage to bundle her into her pram and leave this house. I don't know what will happen out there; in here it is safe.*

Everything changes the second I'm alone with Kayla. *She* changes. She was grizzling before Aiden left but now she ramps it up. It's as if she knows that I'm terrified of her, terrified of everything.

I try feeding her but she refuses the bottle, and a quick check of her nappy shows me it doesn't need changing. Sleep then – it's got to be that. Even though I know what will happen, I cross the room and place her in her Moses basket, silently praying that this time she'll stay put and fall asleep, that she will be powerless to fight her exhaustion. But the second her back touches the mattress she howls, a deafening shriek that I'm sure the neighbours across the road will hear.

Before Kayla, even when I lost all those babies, when I felt more pain than I thought any human could face, I tried to be strong, to keep my sadness contained. Now, though, I have no control over my emotions, and tears flood out while I pace the living room desperate to comfort this baby who doesn't feel like she belongs to me at all, rather that I've been handed her by a mother and asked to watch her for a moment. Surely after three weeks I shouldn't still feel this way.

'What do you want?' I whisper my words even though there is nobody other than Kayla around to hear me. 'I don't know what you want!' Louder this time. I glance at her Moses basket and decide I will put her in again, and this time leave her to try to settle herself. Aiden and I have both said

that we will never leave her to cry, but if she's crying when I'm holding her then surely it makes no difference if I leave her.

I make my way towards it, feeling as though I'm not in control of my footsteps. I will put her in – she will be safe – and then I will go and make myself a cup of tea. Despite having no appetite, I should eat, even though food will only make me sick. Still wearing my maternity clothes means that Aiden hasn't noticed I've already lost all my pregnancy weight and am now half a stone lighter than I was before I got pregnant. I can't have him worrying about me, not when he's the happiest he's ever been. Kayla has made him complete, just like I'm supposed to feel.

As I'm about to place Kayla in the Moses basket, the doorbell rings. I freeze. I'm not expecting any visitors, or any deliveries, and don't want anyone to see me like this, so I choose to ignore it. And then the WhatsApp message pings.

Are you home?

I drop my phone on the floor and stare at it. Then I rush upstairs with Kayla, hoping her cries can't be heard from outside.

The doorbell keeps ringing, and Kayla keeps howling. I shut the bedroom door and sink to the floor, clutching the baby to my chest.

Waiting for all of it to stop.

SIXTEEN

Now

‘Eve? What are you doing here?’

Once again Sophie is shocked to see me standing at her door but underlying that is something else. Guilt? How ironic it is that I’m the one who has betrayed everyone, yet I cannot seem to trust anyone. Sophie hasn’t been honest with me, though, and I’m here to find out why.

‘Can we talk? I left it until this late so that the twins would be asleep.’

‘You’ve clearly never had children then if you think...’ Her hand clamps to her mouth. ‘Oh. I wasn’t thinking. I was just trying to say that it’s not always as easy as putting them down for the night and then getting on with things. They still often wake up needing something. Even at this age.’

I glance past her. In the hall there is no sign of anyone, and no noise.

‘As it happens, they’re actually sleeping well so far tonight. I think nursery tired them out. And Damien’s working late tonight. Come in.’

Without asking if I want anything, Sophie boils the kettle and it feels like it did years before. Whenever we saw each other, the kettle would go on without either of us asking if the other wanted coffee. It was taken for granted, something that would always be, just like we assumed our friendship was.

‘Nicole Richardson came to see me.’ I let her name fill up the room.

Sophie stiffens and stares at the mugs she’s just pulled from the cupboard.

‘I gave her your address,’ she says, quickly recovering. ‘I thought it was the right way forward as she was so supportive of you when I spoke about you.’ There is no apology for not checking whether it was okay with me first. Even in Sophie’s mind – my closest friend – I have gone beyond deserving that courtesy. ‘And not surprisingly, Aiden wasn’t going to give you the time of day,’ she continues.

‘I’m not here to have a go at you, Sophie. I’m glad you did it. Nicole was...’

‘Great, isn’t she? She’s a lovely person – I knew I was doing the right thing.’ She smiles, but it’s more to herself than to me, as if she is

congratulating herself, vindicated in some way.

‘Yes, she was kind. I’m just wondering why you made it seem that you weren’t really in contact, when apparently you’re good friends.’

Sophie abandons making the coffee and folds her arms, staring at the floor. ‘Are you really asking me to explain myself to you?’

‘I’m just saying there’s no need to cover up anything that happened afterwards.’

‘Maybe I was trying to spare your feelings,’ she declares, raising her voice. But she’s not looking at me; a clear sign that she’s lying.

‘I know that,’ I tell her. But everything’s changed, hasn’t it? I don’t know anyone around me any more. And they don’t know me.

‘The truth is my loyalty has to be with Aiden now. I’m sorry.’

Tears prick at my eyes, and I have to turn away from Sophie.

‘And I care about Nicole too. When Aiden met her, I was so happy for him. She was just so *good* for him, Eve. And she’s just so easy to get along with. I immediately bonded with her.’

Despite finding this hard to hear, I can see precisely what Sophie means. ‘So, you know her well, then?’

‘Very well. What you see is what you get with Nicole.’

‘Kayla calls her mummy.’ This is what I’ve come here to say, the lead weight that’s been pressing on my chest since this afternoon.

Sophie nods. ‘What did you expect? Kayla doesn’t know any different. I know it happened organically – Nicole wouldn’t have made her do it.’

But would Aiden have? Did he despise me so much that he needed to erase every part of me from Kayla’s life? I want to ask Sophie this but I can’t trust where her loyalties truly lie, not that I expect them to be with me.

‘What’s the plan anyway?’ Sophie asks, and I’m grateful she has changed the subject.

‘Nicole’s going to try to convince Aiden to let me see Kayla. Until then it’s just a waiting game.’ One which crushes me for every second longer I’m away from my daughter.

‘I know Nicole will do her best,’ Sophie says. ‘If anyone can get through to Aiden, she can.’

These words shouldn’t hurt so much but they’re bullets tearing into my flesh. *You left him. Remember that. You are the one who walked away, not Aiden. But I had no choice, did I? It was all taken out of my hands.*

My phone beeps in my pocket, and I pull it out, desperate for something to distract me from these thoughts. It's Jamie, asking if I want to come over later. I'm about to reply that I will when another text arrives, this time from Nicole.

Not sure if this is a good idea but can you meet me and Kayla in the park opposite our house tomorrow morning at ten? Aiden doesn't know, and I hate keeping it from him, but I'm doing this for Kayla.

I read the words again, just to ensure I'm not mistaken. Kayla. Tomorrow. I'm going to see her properly, close enough to take in every inch of her face.

'Is everything okay?' Sophie asks.

'Um, I think so. That was Nicole.' I hand her my phone so she can read the message for herself, to verify that my mind isn't messing with me.

Sophie nods, as if she's been expecting this. Have the two of them already discussed this plan to meet in the park? 'I knew she'd come through for you,' she says. 'How do you feel?'

'Terrified. Excited. A mixture of both.'

She hands me a mug of coffee. 'You won't tell Kayla who you are, though, will you? I think that would be the totally wrong thing to do.'

'Of course not. I would never just blurt it out.'

Sophie's eyes narrow. 'Because she thinks of Nicole as her mum, so it would be damaging for her to suddenly be confronted with this.'

I try to hide my annoyance; Sophie has helped me after all. 'I know. I would never do that.'

'Nicole thinks—'

'You've spoken to her about this already? You knew she was going to ask me to meet them in the park tomorrow?'

'No. I mean, not really, I only know that she cares about Kayla, and that she thinks keeping you from her could ultimately do more harm than good. I didn't know what exactly she was planning.'

It was only this afternoon that Nicole turned up at my flat, so that means they have communicated in the last few hours. This shouldn't surprise me when Sophie has already admitted that the two of them are close. I try to

ignore the unfair and irrational feeling that Nicole has replaced me in three ways: as Aiden's partner, Kayla's mother and Sophie's friend.

I don't say anything, taking a sip of coffee to stall for time before I have to speak again. I came here with a million things I needed to say, to ask her advice on, but now I'm in the house of a stranger, one I need to be wary around.

'I just want to see Kayla,' I say eventually. 'I can't think past that at the moment.' The words in those emails invade my head. Seeing my daughter can't come quickly enough. I almost offer to let Sophie know how it goes afterwards, but she doesn't need me to fill her in; Nicole will probably do that for me.

'I'd better go,' I tell her. I don't know what's happened since I got here but these walls feel unfriendly. Sophie's not doing anything to make me feel unwelcome, yet I no longer want to be here. I have to trust my instinct.

It's raining when I step outside, and darkness has fallen fast. The air is so cool now that it would be easy to believe that autumn is approaching, even though summer has barely begun.

Remembering Jamie's text, I reply to him as I walk towards the Tube, letting him know that I'm on my way to his place. I won't be able to sleep tonight and it will be nice to have his company. I need to try to focus on him tonight.

He replies with a smiley face and a kiss, and this assures me that I'm doing the right thing.

'What are you hiding?'

My naked body freezes. All I can hear are my deep breaths, echoing through the room. 'What do you mean?'

Jamie strokes my stomach, and I can't help but flinch. It's funny how only moments ago his hands were all over me and I could lose myself in him, yet now I cannot bear to be too close to him. It's always this way.

'I don't know, I just feel like when we, you know, do what we just did then, I get all of you – the whole Eve, and I feel like in those moments I really *know* you.' He smiles. 'But then, like now, I feel like you're not all here.'

In any other circumstances, if I had never met Aiden, then I would have really warmed to Jamie. I can see that we would have worked together. But how can I explain to him that it can never be this way? That I can never be who – or what – he needs?

And he can never be what I need. He is not someone who will just want me for company, someone who won't ask any questions or expect anything. Someone who will just let me be.

'We always seem to end up back here, don't we?' I say, pulling the duvet over me, shifting away from him. 'Maybe I should go.'

'Every time I arrange to see you, I tell myself I'm not going to put pressure on you, and that we can just have a nice time together. Then I see you and... it just goes out of the window. I don't know how to be like that with you, Eve. I don't know how to be *casual* with you. I want more than that. And the crazy thing is – I've never been like this with other women. I usually just go with the flow, that's the kind of person I am, but you... you just...'

I pull my knees up, hug them to my chest. 'And I have the opposite problem. I don't know how to be more than casual with you. Please don't take that the wrong way – it's nothing about you, it's just who I am.'

'I know. I've realised that. But you're under my skin and I don't know how to get you out. I don't think I even *want* to get you out.'

I pull him towards me and stroke his back, trying to lose myself in the feel of his warm, smooth skin. He needs this comfort, and it's the least I can do. Yet instead of being in the moment with Jamie, all I can do is picture Kayla. Running around the park, her long hair flying wildly behind her. And then she is calling, 'Mummy', but it's not me she's speaking to, of course it isn't. It's Nicole.

And then an email pings into my inbox.

Tick tock, tick tock.

SEVENTEEN

Now

I'm early. It's not even half past nine yet but I couldn't wait any longer. I would have come here at five a.m. if I'd thought the park would be open at that hour. There are already a handful of people here – mothers with toddlers, most of them glued to their phones, pausing for air while their children run around freely. These women would never have left their babies. None of them would have done such a despicable thing.

The only entrance to the park is a small red gate, and I keep my gaze fixed on it, desperate to see my daughter appear.

What will my first words be? As I sit there, I imagine all kinds of scenarios, even though it's impossible to predict what might actually happen. I know nothing about young children – she is a toddler now – so there is no way to foresee the conversation we will have.

It's nearly half past ten by the time they arrive. I see Nicole first, opening the gate as she clutches Kayla's hand. She spots me and gives a small wave, but Kayla doesn't notice the gesture and tries to pull Nicole over to the swings. Nicole bends down to her and points in my direction, explaining something to Kayla that I have no way of hearing. It is a bizarre scene to experience: my daughter with the woman who has been her mother for over a year. And here I am – an outsider.

Standing up, I head across to them, forcing a confidence I don't feel in any part of my body. *Kayla is my daughter. Kayla is my daughter. No matter what happens, no one can change that. Not ever.* The mantra plays through my head, fuelling me with the power to see this through.

'Hi.'

Nicole looks up, confusion on her face. 'Eve, hi! This is a nice surprise.' She raises her eyebrows, and I immediately know what she's silently telling me: *Play along with it. I've got it all worked out.*

'Yeah, I, um, I just thought I'd have a walk and enjoy the sun.'

She leans down and wraps her arms around me. 'Well, it's nice to see you.' She leans down to my daughter. 'Kayla, honey, this is my friend, Eve.'

Kayla squints up at me and then slowly brings her hand up in a half wave. She doesn't smile but eyes me suspiciously. Her eyes are dark now, just like mine. They were still blue when I left, the colour undecided as with all newborn babies.

It takes all my willpower not to grab her in my arms and tell her how much I love her. 'Hi, Kayla, it's nice to meet you.' As soon as I've said this, I curse myself; I'm sure this isn't the way to talk to a toddler. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but this is far harder than I imagined.

'Swing, Mummy,' Kayla says, ignoring me and pointing across the playground.

Despite Nicole warning me that Kayla addresses her this way, the pain of hearing it for myself, straight from my daughter's mouth, cripples me.

'Okay,' Nicole is saying. 'Can you play on the small climbing frame for a second, and I'll be right over?'

Kayla nods and heads off, seemingly happy to play independently. She must be a confident child, and that's all thanks to Aiden and Nicole.

'Sorry,' Nicole says as soon as Kayla's out of earshot. 'I just thought it would be easier to let it seem that we just bumped into each other, otherwise Kayla will go home and tell Aiden everything. She might only be two and a half but she's a little chatterbox, that one.' She pauses. 'I have to admit this has been really difficult, and it's hard for me to know exactly what to do. I did try talking to Aiden again last night but he really wouldn't listen. In fact, he's completely shut down. He won't even entertain having a conversation about this, even though it's so important.' She stares at Kayla. 'I can only think that this is bringing up all kinds of unresolved feelings for him, and he's just not able to see what's best for Kayla.'

Even though I'm trying to take in these words, I can't tear my eyes from Kayla. I'm confused by what Nicole's saying; does she mean that Aiden still has feelings for me? I can't let her think that I'm any kind of threat. 'I'm sure the only feeling Aiden has towards me is anger about me leaving. Please don't think that there's anything else. Things move on. I doubt either of us are the same people we were two years ago.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' Nicole says, 'I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. You're right, things change and I'm completely secure in our relationship.' Her face lights up as she turns to Kayla again. 'All that matters is this one. She's such a beautiful little girl. And I don't just mean on the outside. She's also the kindest, most gentle child you could meet.'

We're so proud of her.' Nicole's eyes widen. 'Oh, sorry – this is weird, isn't it? I'm going on and on about Kayla and she's *your* daughter.'

'It's okay,' I tell her. As much as it hurts, I have to be rational about this, and not let my emotions control me.

Nicole pats my hand. 'It's just so hard because... well, not being genetically related to Kayla doesn't stop her being a huge part of my life. And I really do love her to pieces.' She continues watching Kayla before turning back to me. 'Take Aiden, for example. He was adopted yet Pete and Marie are his parents, pure and simple.'

'I know. He couldn't have asked for a more loving mother and father. Nicole, can I confide in you?' The words are out before I'm sure of what I'm doing.

She moves closer to me and places her hand on my arm. 'Yes, of course. I know that might sound weird given our situation – and because you don't really know me – but ultimately we're all here for Kayla, aren't we?'

I stare at her, the woman who it should be easy to dislike, and all I can sense from her is genuine warmth. It's true that I don't know her, but my instinct is telling me that she's okay. That I can trust her. 'The truth is,' I begin, 'that I've been longing for this moment and, now that it's here, I really don't know what to say to Kayla. I don't know how to be around her.' I turn to watch Kayla, who is now busy moving giant counting balls from one side of a bar to the other. 'I thought it would all come naturally, that maybe she'd sense something about me, but there's nothing, is there? There's no bond, nothing to make me stand out to her in any way. I had no idea how hard this would be.'

Nicole nods, as if she completely understands what I'm explaining. 'Is that what you wanted to happen? For her to know you're her mum without anyone having to say anything?'

I consider her question. 'Not exactly. I wasn't expecting the impossible, just for... I don't know, for her to smile at me or something.'

Nicole reaches for my hand. 'Look, I totally get how difficult this must be for you. Actually, difficult is not the word, is it? It's an impossible situation. Just try to remember that she's two and a half. We've tried to bring her up to be careful around strangers, so that's probably why she wasn't over-friendly with you. Please don't think it means anything.'

'You're right. I need to accept that this will take a lot of time and nothing's going to come easily. That's okay. After what I did, I don't expect

anything else. I suppose it just shocked me, that's all.'

'Kids take a while to get used to people, and this is the first time she's seen you. The more you see Kayla, the more you'll have a chance to bond.'

'Yes. That's what I want more than anything.'

Nicole turns back to check on Kayla, but she doesn't need to. I have been watching her the whole time. She is safe. 'We'll just have to understand how Aiden feels. Today I just wanted you to have the chance to see her properly, but I can't keep lying to him or keeping things from him. You'll have to give this time. I will try to talk to him again, though.'

'Thanks, Nicole. I don't want anything to come between you two, so don't push it too much. I'm happy to keep trying to get through to him myself.'

She bites her lip. 'You could. I don't know, though. Is that a good idea? Maybe it's best if you leave it to me?'

I tell her she's probably right just as Kayla runs over to us.

'Mummy, the swing!'

Even though Kayla is speaking to Nicole, I crouch down to her level. 'How about *I* push you?' I offer.

Kayla stares at me for what seems like minutes before shaking her head. 'No. I want Mummy.' She rushes forward to Nicole and throws her arms around her.

Her words tear me to pieces, and it's all I can do to pull myself to standing again. Over Kayla's head, Nicole mouths *I'm sorry*. I shake my head and hope she knows I'm trying to tell her that it's not her fault.

'Come on, then,' Nicole says to Kayla, and I watch as they head off to the swings, hand in hand. Mother and daughter.

Even though I feel like an intruder spying on someone else's life, I won't give up. I can't. Not when there's so much at stake. I've come this far, and nothing will make me run from my daughter now.

'What the hell?'

His voice echoes through the park, and I know immediately who it is.

I turn, and Aiden is striding over to me. Even from this distance I can tell his cheeks are flushed. A pang of familiarity stings me, a blurring of the past and present as I recall how easily his skin reddens.

‘Get away from her,’ he shouts again.

Standing up, I glance over at Nicole and Kayla, neither of whom have noticed Aiden appear. It’s busy and noisy enough here to mask his shouts too, and I’m grateful that Kayla hasn’t heard him.

‘Keep your voice down,’ I say. ‘Please.’

‘Why should I? What the hell are you doing here, Eve?’

Before I can answer, Kayla rushes over to us, wrapping her arms around Aiden’s legs. ‘Daddy!’

‘Hey, bunny,’ he says, scooping her up. He turns to Nicole, his voice softer now. ‘What’s going on?’

Nicole reaches for his arm. ‘I, um—’

‘I just turned up here, hoping to see you all.’ The lie comes easily; I can’t cause trouble for Nicole after what she’s done for me.

Aiden stares at me; there will be a multitude of things he wants to say to me, most of them probably accusations, but he is mindful of Kayla hearing what must be kept between adults.

‘Why don’t we go home?’ Nicole says before Aiden can speak. ‘I’ll tell you what, Kayla – let’s get the Play-Doh out and we can make some cupcakes.’

‘Yay!’ Kayla says, reaching out her arms for Nicole. Aiden passes her over and hangs back while Nicole and Kayla head off.

‘You can’t do this,’ he hisses now that he has free rein to let me know what he thinks. ‘You have no right.’

‘I just wanted to see her, Aiden. I swear to you I haven’t said anything.’

‘Did you think Nicole wouldn’t know who you are? She’s seen photos of you, Eve. If she’d noticed you here she would have taken Kayla away immediately.’

‘Why are you acting as if I’m a danger to her, Aiden?’

‘But that’s the problem, isn’t it, Eve? That’s exactly what you are and we both know it.’

EIGHTEEN

Before

‘Shall I pop over after school?’

It’s lunchtime, and I can tell from the chatter in the background that Sophie is calling me from the staffroom. Her voice is full of enthusiasm; Kayla is eight weeks old now, and Sophie’s only laid eyes on her once. I’ve become a master at making up excuses to avoid leaving the house, to avoid other people. ‘Kayla’s a bit poorly,’ I tell her. ‘I think she’s picked up a cold from somewhere. She’s been sleeping a lot today, probably just needs to rest.’ It sounds ridiculous: what else can an eight-week-old baby do?

‘Oh, no – poor little poppet. You won’t want visitors then. Maybe next week? It will be great to see you both again. I feel like it’s been a very long time, Eve.’

I force myself to believe that by next week I will feel okay, that I will want to be around people, to lose myself in chatter, to feel normal again. It will take a lot more than just hope, though. ‘Definitely,’ I say, filling my voice with forced confidence.

‘Well, I’d better go, I really need some food and I still have to set up the classroom for my rowdy Year 8s. Lord help me!’

I promise that I’ll call her, and when I hang up relief floods over me; keeping up the pretence gets harder with each day. How much longer will I be able to fool people?

Kayla’s asleep on our bed – the only place she would settle this afternoon. I’m still not dressed and desperately need to shower and wash my hair, but I can’t leave her here alone. She’s showing no signs of rolling over yet, but the second I rush to the bathroom could be the exact moment she decides to attempt it for the first time. Our bed is too far from the floor, too, so there is no way she would be okay if she fell. I’m sure at this age her skull isn’t even fused together yet.

Picking her up to transfer her to the cot is not an option either; her eyes are bound to pop open the second I try to lift her. No, I’ll have to wait for my shower, like I always do, until Aiden gets home. He thinks I prefer to have them in the evening when I’ve got more time, even though for as long

as he's known me I've had my showers in the morning. It was a ritual I never deviated from until Kayla was born.

Kneeling beside the bed, I watch the rise and fall of Kayla's tiny chest, take in the calming sound of each breath she takes. With her eyes closed she looks so peaceful that it's impossible to believe what a monster she can be at times. I know none of it's her fault; she didn't ask to be here. I made that decision for her, and now I don't know what I've done. Even though I'm the one who carried her inside me, it is Aiden she has bonded with. The second he picks her up she is calm and soothed, until he hands her to me. It's as if she despises me. My rational brain tells me that this is impossible, that there is no way for her to understand this emotion, yet that is exactly what it feels like. A cruel and deliberate hoax.

I lie down on the bed next to Kayla and continue to stare at her, trying to force myself to feel love – or anything positive – for this tiny helpless being, but the truth is I just want her to keep sleeping. I don't want her to wake up; I want to live in this moment forever. A permanent pause.

The next thing I'm aware of is being woken by deafening shrieks, close to my ear. Kayla's still in the middle of the bed, exactly where I placed her, and I'm right up against her. My heart thuds and I struggle to breathe. I could have crushed her. She could have suffocated under my weight.

Quickly I scoop her up and take her downstairs for a feed, trying to push aside my fear and guilt over what could have happened. For a few hours, I am extra caring towards her, ignoring her constant squirming, as if she is desperate to be out of my arms. Grateful that she's not crying at least, I place her on her play mat and sing to her. Kayla seems to like this and stops groaning to listen to me. Finally, I have found something that calms her.

'How was your day?' Aiden asks.

We're sitting at the table eating a meal I managed to throw together once Aiden came home and took over with Kayla. He offered to cook, but the thought of even just another half hour of holding the baby or singing to her felt like something I couldn't manage. At least while I was preparing beef chilli, I was free, a different person somehow, albeit temporarily.

And now Kayla is fast asleep in Aiden's arms while he eats, peaceful and content, as if she is right where she belongs and she has everything she

needs right there with him.

‘It was good,’ I tell him. ‘I got some cleaning done too.’ There is no need for me to have added this untruth, and I also should tell him about the dangerous situation I put Kayla in. I have become a deceitful liar, while Aiden was always the person I could tell anything. What am I afraid of? He would never judge me. For anything. He would only try to help.

And he would also realise that I’m not the woman he thought I was. That he doesn’t know me. I don’t even know myself. All I know is that everything is wrong and sooner or later something terrible will happen. The walls will close in on me.

Aiden puts down his knife and fork and smiles. ‘D’you know what? I don’t think I knew what true happiness was until this little one came along. I just feel so... content.’

A switch flicks inside my head, and I picture myself screaming at him. *You’re not the one who has her all day. You come home in the evening and see the best of her. You don’t have to deal with the relentless slog, the isolation and monotony. The crushing fear.*

But in a moment of clarity which comes immediately after this thought, I understand why I’m silently attacking him. It is my guilt. Because I can’t change what happened.

Aiden watches me, waiting for me to agree. This is another opportunity for me to explain how much I’m struggling, but I let it die. There is no way I can start talking about it. Not now. Not ever.

Later, I stand under the shower with the too-hot water burning my skin. Even though it hurts, the pain is somehow comforting. In here, I am in a bubble, separate from all that exists outside of this door. I close my eyes and pretend I’m no longer here, or anywhere. It is a comforting thought.

And then, without any warning, I am wondering what it would be like if Kayla was the one who didn’t exist.

NINETEEN

Now

Maya hasn't turned up for her tutoring session. I've called her mobile several times, and it just rings until her voicemail kicks in. She's never done this before, and I can't help but worry, especially after witnessing her argument with Connor the other day. And considering the things she said last time I saw her, there is every chance that she is no longer pregnant, that something has forced her to take action sooner rather than later. I will always have space in my head to worry about her, even though I have enough to fear. For me. For Kayla. The walls are closing in.

For over an hour I've been standing by my window, watching out for Maya, my mind torn between worry over her and the next steps to take with my daughter. Aiden will not let me near Kayla, so now I have to fight back in a way I didn't think I'd ever have to consider.

On my phone, I research local solicitors dealing with family law. It won't be cheap, but I will take on more work to cover it; Aiden has left me no choice.

Once I've narrowed it down to three firms, I make a note of their numbers before texting Nicole. After thanking her for bringing Kayla to the park, it's only right that I let her know what I'm considering doing if Aiden isn't reasonable about this.

Her reply is immediate: she understands but hopes I will give her a chance to speak to Aiden before I do anything. As much as I want to get things moving, this is the least I can do for her.

Outside, Jamie's car pulls up, and I see him tapping something into his phone. I turn around and stare at my weekend bag, dumped by the living room door. It's packed and ready, all I need to do is grab it and lock up my flat, head off with Jamie to the Lake District for a couple of nights. I owe it to him. I've got Maya's address, so I will ask him if we can make a quick detour on the way.

The second I answer the door and see Jamie's face, I know something is wrong.

‘We can’t go,’ he says. ‘I’m sorry, my dad’s just called and Mum’s been taken to hospital. They think it’s a stroke or something. I’d literally just pulled up outside when my phone rang. I’ll have to cancel our trip.’

‘Oh, Jamie, of course. I’m so sorry. How is she doing?’

‘Dad didn’t say too much, he’s too choked up. I’m going straight up there now so I’ll let you know more later. Sorry to do this to you, Eve.’

‘Please don’t apologise, just get going. And let me know how she is.’

He leans forward and kisses my forehead. ‘I will.’

Shutting the door behind him, it occurs to me that fate has taken this out of my hands. I’m not meant to spend the weekend in the Lake District with Jamie.

Perhaps fate has something else in store for me.

Everything about this is wrong. I’m standing outside Maya’s house and I have no right to pry into her life like this; whatever she does outside of our tutoring sessions is none of my business. She is also eighteen. A young adult.

I feel like an intruder walking along the path to her front door. I haven’t been given her permission to be here, and I only know where she lives from the admin forms my students fill in. I’m crossing an ethical line to be here, but I need to make sure she’s okay.

The woman who answers the door is a carbon copy of Maya and looks barely a few years older. I assume it’s her sister until she speaks – her voice is deep and filled with the knowingness that comes with age. ‘Hello,’ she says, raising her eyebrows.

‘I’m so sorry to turn up like this. I’m Maya’s tutor – Eve Martin.’

The woman smiles. ‘Oh, yes. Maya talks about you all the time. Thank you so much for helping her with her English. I’m Maya’s mum, Bal.’

I nod. ‘Um, I just came because we had a session booked for this morning but Maya didn’t turn up. I’m a bit worried about her. If it were any other student I’d probably just think they couldn’t be bothered, but that’s just not Maya. She’s never missed a session before.’

Bal frowns. ‘She’s not here. She stayed at a friend’s house last night and hasn’t come home yet, but please come in.’

My body won't let me move. I'm comfortable out here, where the space isn't too personal, and have no desire to enter the home of a stranger, even though I know Maya, and her mother seems kind. 'Um, that's okay, I don't want to keep you from—'

'No, no, you must come in.'

Despite my reservations, I give in. I'm doing this for Maya.

The house is small and, although it's clean, it's cluttered with ornaments, all crammed so tightly together that it's impossible to distinguish one from another. I try not to stare at the chaos while Bal leads me through to the kitchen.

'Can I get you anything? Tea or coffee?'

'No, thank you. I really just wanted to quickly check on Maya.'

Bal seems disappointed. 'Are you sure she had a session today? There's nothing in the calendar, and Maya's always so careful about writing everything down.'

Now I'm confused. Could I have got the dates wrong? I don't usually make mistakes with appointments but it's possible given everything that's been going on. 'That's strange. Perhaps I've made a mistake, then. I did try to call Maya but got no answer – have you heard from her at all today?'

A frown appears on Bal's face, and for the first time since she opened the door to me, I sense she is wary of me now, that perhaps she finds it odd that I am here just because Maya didn't turn up for a session.

'She said she didn't feel well during our last session, so when she didn't turn up this morning I just wanted to check there's nothing wrong. Her exams are soon and this was one of our last sessions.'

'I haven't had a text from her, no.' Bal stares at me for a moment. 'I know you only see her a couple of times a week but have you... noticed anything different about Maya lately?'

I have to be careful here; Maya has confided in me and I can't be the one to expose her secret to her family, no matter how much I wish she would talk to her parents. 'I'm not sure what you mean?'

'Oh, it's probably just me being an overprotective mum, but she just seems to have become a bit distant lately. Her dad's noticed it, too. We've always been a close family but Maya never seems to be here. It's as if she's deliberately avoiding us.'

'Please don't worry – I think she's just growing up. She's a young woman now and is just starting to live her own life.'

‘Oh, I know you’re right. But... oh, never mind. I’m sure I’m just overreacting.’ She smiles. ‘Do you have children?’

For the first time in two years my answer comes immediately, with no forethought. ‘Yes. I have a daughter called Kayla.’ As soon as the words are out I realise my error. This is not a stranger I’m talking to – I am linked to this woman through my student. A student who thinks I have no children. My cheeks flush and sweat oozes from my palms. Perhaps there’s a chance I will be lucky and Bal won’t think to mention this to Maya.

‘How lovely! How old is she?’

Or perhaps it is the first thing she will mention to Maya when she gets home. ‘Two and a half.’

She smiles and nods. ‘That’s such a lovely age, isn’t it? I do miss the girls being so young. The house felt so alive when they were little, and now it’s just like a lobby where we pass each other in the mornings and at night, saying hellos or goodbyes, never stopping long enough for a decent chat. Maya’s sister is away at uni in Manchester, so we only see her during the holidays.’ Her mouth becomes a thin smile. ‘Just make the most of every second. It’s gone before you know it, and then you’re worrying about where they are and what boys they’re involved with.’

I need to get out of this house, to breathe in some fresh air and loosen this rope around my neck. But I need to endure this; I’ve got to make sure Maya is okay. ‘Maya’s got a decent boyfriend, though, hasn’t she?’

‘Oh, Connor’s a nice boy. It still feels as though Maya’s too young for all that, though. I know she’s not, of course, but, well, you’ll see when your little girl reaches eighteen. It doesn’t get any easier.’

I will make sure this happens; that I am always there to help her through difficult teenage years. That I keep her safe.

‘Do you expect Maya back this morning?’ I need to change the subject before Bal realises something is wrong, that I am not all I claim to be.

The frown returns to her face. ‘I don’t know actually. I’ll text her now. See where she is.’ She crosses to the worktop and reaches for her phone, her long manicured nails clicking on the screen as she types in a message. ‘She’s normally good at replying. Let’s just give it a minute.’

Immediately Bal’s phone beeps, and she smiles as she reads the text. ‘She’s fine, nothing to worry about. Says she’s just woken up and didn’t realise she had a session today. I’m so sorry she’s made you waste your time coming here. Not many teachers would have bothered.’

‘I’m just glad Maya’s okay.’ We both fall silent; there is nothing more to say. ‘Well, I’ve taken up enough of your time. It was lovely to meet you. And don’t worry about the session today. I can see Maya tomorrow or Monday, just tell her to text me.’

‘That’s so kind of you,’ Bal says. ‘Maya’s so lucky to have you as a tutor.’

I study her face – she barely looks older than me, so she must have been extremely young when she had children. Clearly she could handle whatever motherhood threw at her.

Guilt clamps hold of me as I walk out of the house. I have let Maya and her whole family down. I should have told Maya about Kayla when she first revealed that she didn’t want to keep her baby; that way at least she might have considered that she could end up regretting her decision. I could have told her all the things I wish I’d known before I walked out. It probably wouldn’t have changed her mind but at least I could have tried. *Do anything to protect the people you care about, even if it’s at your own cost.*

Inside the car, I buckle my seatbelt and reach for my phone.

Maya, it’s Eve again. Please text me so I know you’re okay.

Filled with hope that she’ll reply this time, I sit for a few minutes staring at a phone that remains silent. It’s only when I drive off that it pings, the familiar sound of an email landing in my inbox. I will ignore it until I get home; at least that way I have the drive home to pretend it’s junk or spam. Something from a mailing list I’m subscribed to.

For the rest of the day my phone has been silent, and I haven’t even heard from Jamie. It’s as if I’m in a vacuum, separate from the rest of the world, unable to communicate with anyone. Except the person intent on reminding me that time is running out.

Giving up on today, I climb into bed and pull the duvet up to my chin, despite the heat. Just as I’m drifting to sleep, my mobile rings and Nicole’s name lights up the screen.

‘Sorry it’s so late,’ she begins, ‘but I just had to call and tell you. Aiden’s agreed for us all to have lunch together. Can you believe it? I guess all my nagging has paid off!’

Her words force me awake, and I sit up. ‘That’s... great. Thank you, Nicole.’

‘I think there’ll be a long road ahead of us all, but this is the first step, isn’t it? Anyway, can you do tomorrow for lunch? At ours?’

‘I’ll be there.’

‘For Kayla we’ll just stick to the story about you being a friend of mine for now. Aiden’s insisting on that. I guess further down the line we’ll work out what to tell her about everything.’

I agree and thank her again. ‘How did you convince him?’

‘It wasn’t easy,’ Nicole explains. ‘But I think he realises you’re not going to let this go. And I did mention that you could take legal action. In fact, I told him that I would do exactly the same in your position. You are her mum after all, aren’t you?’

I was hoping Aiden would have agreed without fear of my threat, but it doesn’t matter. I’m going to see my daughter tomorrow and this time it’s with Aiden’s blessing. And once I am back in her life, they will never get me out.

TWENTY

Before

How is it possible to feel so alone when this shopping centre is full of people? I glance at Kayla, lying on her back in her pram, and know with certainty that this is worse than loneliness. Being here alone would allow me to browse the shops. Or have a coffee and read a book. I wouldn't feel lonely; I'd feel at peace. But I'm not alone and I have a baby who needs me for every single thing, who relies on me.

Kayla didn't ask to be here; she is innocent in all of this. It's my fault, all down to my choices. She stares back at me and produces a vague smile, but this loving gesture does nothing to penetrate the numbness. Perfunctorily taking care of her physical needs is all I can give her.

As desperate for a coffee as I am, for a kick of caffeine to help me feel at least something, there is no way I can stop pushing this pram for long enough to sit down. I've seen other mums relaxing in coffee shops while their babies sit happily on their knees, or in their prams – but not Kayla. No, I have to keep her moving.

I only ventured out today because she wouldn't sleep anywhere, even in my arms. But now I'm here, and for the last hour I've been pacing up and down the shopping centre, and Kayla still won't sleep.

Please, I silently beg. Please just close your eyes and fall asleep, and then maybe – just maybe – I will dare to nip into Costa and order a latte. Extra strong.

Of course she doesn't, and as I wander up and down, shedding tears for myself, and for Kayla, it strikes me that I am the only person here on my own.

The lift opens as I walk past it and I stop and stare through the glass door. Just for a second – a fraction of a second – I picture myself pushing Kayla into it and sending it up while I stay down here and walk away. She would be safe. Someone would find her.

I am a monster.

I turn around to see if anyone is watching me, if anyone could tell what I've just imagined doing – but nobody is looking. Everyone is minding their

own business.

And that's when I see him. He's walking away from me, and I only have a view of his back, but it's definitely him.

Quickly, I turn and push the buggy in the other direction.

'You can't avoid me forever!' Sophie says, making her way into the house. 'I've been desperate to see this little one. Come here, give her to me.' She eases Kayla from my arms and holds her out in front of her to have a good look. 'She's beautiful, Eve. She looks just like Aiden. And you, of course. She's definitely got his mouth, hasn't she?'

'Do you think so?'

'Oh, yeah. Now, you get the kettle on while I entertain this one.'

It's only five o'clock and I'm already in my pyjamas, but Sophie doesn't seem to have noticed. She's too smitten with Kayla to pay attention to how I'm dressed.

'So, where's that husband of yours?' she asks, following me into the kitchen.

'Working late. Not back until around nine tonight.'

'Why didn't you say? I could have stayed and cooked you dinner. Only I told Damien I'd just be popping out for an hour, so he decided last minute to meet up with his friends tonight.'

I tell Sophie not to worry, that actually I'm quite tired. 'Think I'm coming down with something.' I never thought I'd be able to lie to Sophie, but now it happens with ease. 'That's why I'm wearing these.' I tug at my pyjama bottoms, and Sophie laughs.

'I didn't notice!' she says. 'That's not like me. Anyway, you take this little one back, and I'll make the drinks. You do look a bit pale actually.'

'I'll be okay. Why don't I make the coffee and you can cuddle Kayla? You have just been complaining that you never get to see her.'

'True. I'm happy with that.' She strokes Kayla's cheek. 'I really miss these early days, when they're just so... cuddly. Strange, isn't it? Before I had the twins I was never a baby person. Now I'd love to go back and have those newborn days again.'

This couldn't be further from my own feelings. I would give anything to be out of this fog, and Sophie would happily relive it with her twins. This

woman is my best friend, yet I'm now struggling to find any common ground with her. *Of course it would be this way, everything's changed. Your life is no longer anything like hers, even though you are both mothers.*

'How are things at school?' I ask. It's a lifetime ago since I was there, and when I go back I will walk through those doors a different person.

Sophie raises her eyes. 'Oh, nothing ever changes, does it? I love being in the classroom but the planning and marking is still a grind. And it's hard being away from the boys so much of the time.' She looks around. 'Got to keep paying the mortgage, though.'

Another glaring difference between us. I would give anything to be working again, to be able to leave this house for a few hours every day. To focus on my students instead of my own pain. I haven't told Sophie my plan yet; perhaps I hadn't even confirmed it in my own mind until now. 'I'm thinking of giving up teaching,' I say.

Her mouth hangs open. 'No! Really? But you love it!'

It takes me a moment to compose my answer. 'It's like you said – now I'm a mum everything's changed. I can't imagine coming home and spending all evening marking when all I'll want to do is play with Kayla.'

Sophie stares at me for a long time. 'Really?' she asks again.

She knows I'm lying – she can see straight to my core.

'I might just do tutoring or something. Fit my hours in around the baby.'

'That does make sense. But wouldn't you be lost without teaching? It's... who we are, isn't it?'

Who I was. That person no longer exists. 'Maybe you're right,' I say to pacify Sophie because the way she's looking at me is making me feel exposed. 'We'll see what happens.'

Finally she smiles, and I'm off the hook. 'We never know what the future has in store for us. That's what I love about life,' she says.

And that's exactly what terrifies me.

TWENTY-ONE

Now

Aiden opens the door with no hint of a smile, no warmth whatsoever on his face. He stares at me for a moment before finally speaking. 'You'd better come in, then.' His words are mechanical and forced, as if he has promised Nicole he will be on his best behaviour for her sake. *It's me*, I want to say. *The woman you once loved.*

Stepping inside, I'm not prepared for the feeling that overwhelms me: I am out of my depth here, somewhere I don't belong and have no right to be. Then I hear Kayla's giggles coming from upstairs; a reminder that I need to see this through.

The house smells of citrus, and I notice patches of water on the hallway floor where someone must have recently mopped. 'Shall I take my shoes off?' I ask Aiden, and he gives a slight nod. Some things never change.

Aiden gestures for me to head into the first room off the hall – a small but light and airy living room. Some of Kayla's toys are scattered across the floor, yet somehow the room doesn't look messy, just full of life. It's funny how much warmer a home can feel with children living in it.

'Nicole's just changing Kayla's clothes,' Aiden mumbles. 'She managed to pour water all over herself.'

'What was she doing?' I ask, praying we can keep this small talk going, and that he won't retreat.

'Drinking from her cup. She's generally fine holding it but she dropped it. Anyway, does it matter?'

I hold up my hand. 'No, I was just showing an interest, nothing more. I'm not here to analyse how you parent.'

'No, you lost the right to do that a long time ago. Anyway, it's how Nicole and I parent. We're in this together, whether you like it or not.' His voice is barely more than a whisper.

Aiden's hostility saddens me. This is not the man I remember, no matter what's happened. He was always a fair and kind person, someone willing to try and see all sides of a situation. Not for the first time, it hits me that what I did has changed so many people's lives.

‘I’m not here to argue. I just want what’s best for Kayla.’

‘Just because Nicole—’

‘Hi, Eve, thanks for coming. I didn’t hear the doorbell.’ Nicole stands in the living room doorway, clutching Kayla’s hand. She turns to her. ‘Kayla, do you remember my friend who we saw in the park the other day? Eve.’

Kayla nods shyly, then grabs onto Nicole’s leg. In her other hand she’s holding a cream-coloured bunny. ‘Can I play, Mummy?’

Hearing Kayla address Nicole this way makes me feel sick, but I force a smile.

‘Of course you can. It’s lunchtime soon, though, okay?’ Nicole gently ruffles Kayla’s hair, and a deep pang of envy runs through my body.

I watch as Kayla sits on the floor and rummages through her toys, oblivious to me. I was stupid to think there might be some sort of invisible link between us that would show her who I am without anyone even telling her. She still has no idea. I could be anyone. I thought just being in her presence would be enough, but as each second passes it’s clear that it won’t be.

‘Has Aiden offered you something to drink?’ Nicole asks, walking over to him and patting his arm.

‘I’m sure he was just about to,’ I say, and Nicole laughs. How ironic that this stranger is making me feel more comfortable than the man I used to know every inch of? ‘Just water, thanks.’

‘It’s buffet food for lunch. Bits and pieces like sausage rolls, sandwiches, that kind of thing. I thought I could do a roast but Kayla’s been a bit clingy the last couple of days, so I haven’t had a chance to get organised. Plus, I’m not feeling too great. Nothing serious, just exhausted I think.’

‘That’s because you’re doing so much,’ Aiden says. ‘Kayla and I really appreciate it, though.’

He’s said this for my benefit, but I brush it off. Aiden doesn’t have to like me; I’m here now in his house and this is the first step, no matter how awkward it feels.

‘Right,’ Nicole says, ‘Aiden, can you come and help me get the food ready and Eve can play with Kayla for a minute?’

My heart races. Are they really going to leave me alone with Kayla?

Aiden stares at Nicole and doesn’t say anything. He’s trying to communicate silently with her, to tell her he doesn’t want this. But before

he can protest, she grabs his arm and leads him off to the kitchen, telling Kayla that I will play with her while she gets lunch ready.

As much as I want this, as soon as they leave the room, I am far out of my comfort zone. This should come naturally to me, yet I have no idea how to talk to Kayla, how to be around her.

I move across to her, where she is engrossed in playing with her doll's house, and sit on the floor beside her. 'That's a lovely house,' I begin.

She doesn't look at me but nods. 'Mummy got it for me. For my birthday.'

Although I have nothing to compare it to, it strikes me that she speaks remarkably well for a two-and-a-half-year-old.

'Well, it's very special. I bet your little dolls love living in it. I'd love to live in a house like that.'

Again she nods, picking up one of her figures and handing it to me. 'That's Lucy.' She holds the doll out. 'You can have her.'

'Oh, can I? Thank you very much!'

'You're welcome!'

Pride for this little girl fills me up. In those first three months of her life, I could feel nothing, yet now I am flooded with emotions – with love – for *my* little girl.

We play quietly for a few minutes. My conversational skills have escaped me as my mind tries to absorb that I'm finally with my girl, doing something normal, that any mum would do.

'Mummy!' Kayla suddenly says, and for the briefest of moments I actually believe she is speaking to me. Then she is standing up and running to Nicole who is framed in the doorway, watching us.

'Lunch is ready!' she says, scooping Kayla into her arms.

It's clear that none of us really knows what to say as we sit around the table picking at our food. Thankfully, Kayla provides us with distraction and fills the room with her toddler chatter. Before now I have never been an envious person, but witnessing the interaction between my daughter and Nicole consumes me with grief.

Aiden pushes his food around his plate, hardly touching it. Several times I notice Nicole glaring at him, but he cannot bring himself to look at me, or make any attempt to speak to me.

'I just need to help Kayla on the toilet,' Nicole announces suddenly. 'Aiden, you can come and help.' It's not hard to guess what she's doing; she

is planning to instruct Aiden to be more civil to me. Nicole promises they won't be long, and then the three of them head upstairs.

Left alone, my head begins to pound, so I reach into my bag for some paracetamol. I take two, but I doubt they will do anything to relieve the painful throbbing.

Minutes tick by and if it wasn't for the dull rumbling of voices floating downstairs, it would feel as though I am alone in this strange house. A home that isn't mine but should be. The lunch on the table is still yet to be finished, and I stare at the dark pink lipstick mark on Nicole's glass of water.

'Sorry about that,' Nicole says a few minutes later, taking me by surprise. Aiden and Kayla follow behind, and we resume eating as though there's been no interruption.

If Nicole has indeed spoken to Aiden about going easier on me then it's made no difference and the next hour passes painfully slowly. I try to focus on Kayla, but the whole time she's either clambering onto Nicole's nap or begging Aiden to swing her up in the air.

'It's time for your nap now, young lady,' Nicole says once we've finished our food. She turns to me. 'And then the three of us can talk.'

Aiden grunts something, and again Nicole serves him with another scowl before whisking Kayla upstairs.

'I know this must make you feel very uncomfortable,' I say to Aiden. 'But I'm not going away. I want to be in her life and nothing's going to stop that.'

Aiden stares at me. 'And have you stopped – just for one second – to consider how this is going to work? Do you think we can just suddenly say, "Hey, Kayla, Eve is actually your mum. Surprise!"'

'No, of course not!'

'What then? You tell me how this can possibly work!'

'I... don't know exactly. Maybe we can get a counsellor involved or something? To help us work out the best way forward?'

'There is no way any of this can be good for Kayla. No way!' He's raising his voice now, forgetting to keep it low so that we're not overheard.

'Neither is denying I'm her mother, keeping the truth about who she is from her. That's not—'

A scream from upstairs cuts me off. It's Kayla – something's happened. Jumping from my seat, I rush into the hallway, heading for the stairs, not

caring that it's Aiden's house. He follows behind me, trying his best to get past me.

Nicole is sitting at the top of the stairs, doubled over, clutching her stomach. Not Kayla then. Kayla is okay at least. But Nicole needs help.

Aiden finally gets past me and flies up the stairs, kneeling in front of Nicole. 'Are you okay? What's happened?'

She looks up at him, her eyes wide and frightened, and even from further down the stairs I can see the tears sliding down her cheeks. 'Something's wrong... my stomach... it hurts so much.'

'Let me help you downstairs.' Aiden gently guides her down to the living room, and Nicole collapses on the floor, clutching her stomach.

'You need to get her to the hospital,' I say.

Flustered, Aiden reaches for his mobile. 'I'll call an ambulance.'

'No,' Nicole manages to say, 'I don't need an ambulance.'

I lean down beside her. 'Nicole, has this happened before? Do you know what it could be?'

She shakes her head.

'I think you really need to get to A&E. I would take you but I didn't drive here today.'

Nicole lifts her head and turns to Aiden. 'Can you take me?'

'Of course, but what about Kayla? I'll go and wake her up.'

'No, Aiden.' Nicole turns to me. 'Can you stay here with her?'

Even though she's talking to me now, it takes me a moment to register what she's asking, what it means.

'Yes, I... of course I can.'

'No way,' Aiden chimes in. 'We can't leave Kayla here with Eve. That's insane!'

Nicole gasps. 'We're not waking her up to drag her to the hospital. I could be there for hours! Eve will be okay looking after her.'

Aiden stares at me before turning his attention back to Nicole, writhing around on the floor. 'No. I'll call your mum,' he says. 'She'll come.'

Nicole's skin turns paler by the second, and she lets out a groan. 'It will take her too long to get here. And I think she's out today. Please, Aiden, can we just go? Now!'

'Kayla will be fine,' I say. 'When she wakes up, I'll just tell her you'll be back soon and we're going to have some fun and play some games. She'll be fine, Aiden.'

‘She doesn’t even know you! You’re a stranger to her!’

‘Aiden, please.’ Nicole’s voice is strained. ‘I need to go *now*!’

Helping Nicole up, Aiden finally acquiesces. ‘You’ll need to keep checking on her as the baby monitor’s broken.’ He’s talking to me but refuses to look in my direction. ‘Her room’s the first on the right at the top of the stairs. I’ll call from the hospital and tell you where everything is. She’ll need a snack when she wakes up.’ He shakes his head. ‘I don’t bloody like this.’

‘Aiden, please!’ Nicole pleads. ‘We need to go now, it’s getting worse.’

When they’ve gone, leaving me alone with Kayla in their house, despite hoping that Nicole will be okay, I can’t help but marvel at how fate has once again conspired to bring me closer to my daughter.

I leave it half an hour before I check on Kayla, and in that time I don’t move from the sofa. It feels like a violation to walk around their house, to take in their belongings and form a picture of how they live, especially when Nicole is in hospital. And she is the reason I’m here, after all. She is the one who has helped me. I pray that she’ll be okay.

Standing by her door, I listen to the sounds of Kayla’s steady breathing. The blinds are down in her room, so I can only make out her outline, but being here with her fills me with warmth. It is so different from the last time I would have watched her sleeping. *I didn’t think I could love you then, Kayla, but now I know that there is no way I can’t. No way in hell will I let you go again.*

Instead of going back downstairs, I close her door again and sit at the top of the stairs, close enough that I will hear when she awakes.

It’s another hour before she does, and when I go in to get her up, explaining where Aiden and Nicole are, she bursts into tears.

‘Mummy!’ she screams. ‘I want my mummy!’

TWENTY-TWO

Now

Aiden arrives home by himself, walking into the living room to find Kayla cuddled up to me, fast asleep. He stares at us, taking in the unusual scene, and I wait for him to rush over and grab her away.

‘How’s Nicole doing?’ I ask, checking the time. He’s been gone for five hours. That can’t be good.

He doesn’t try to take Kayla but flops onto the sofa, a different man from the one who left this house earlier. ‘Not very well. They can’t work out what’s going on. It’s not her appendix, and they couldn’t scan her today so they’re hoping they can do it tomorrow. She told me to come home.’

I gesture to Kayla. ‘She was so upset that you both weren’t here, but I managed to calm her down eventually. It took a long time but I was able to distract her and then we played for ages. I didn’t know what to do for her dinner, so I made her boiled egg and toasted soldiers. It’s what Mum always told me I used to like as a toddler.’

He raises his eyebrows. ‘And she actually ate it? She never eats eggs.’

‘Not all of it but she did okay. Sorry she’s not in bed. I didn’t want to wake her by transferring her upstairs.’

‘It’s okay. I’ll carry her up in a minute.’ He buries his head in his hands. ‘What if it’s something they can’t cure?’

‘Don’t think like that, Aiden. They’ll get to the bottom of it and whatever it is, they’ll give her the treatment she needs.’

He stares at me, his expression unreadable, and I prepare myself for an attack.

‘You’re right.’ Standing up he leans down to extract Kayla from my arms.

As he carries her off, it occurs to me that Aiden is being civil to me. All the anger seems to have dissipated like air from a burst balloon. I wouldn’t go so far as to say there is warmth there, but something has definitely changed.

‘Can I do anything?’ I ask when he comes back downstairs.

‘No. I’m used to being on my own. Kayla and I will manage until Nicole’s back home and feeling well again.’ He glances at me, then stares at the floor. ‘Thanks for helping, though.’

‘You don’t have to thank me, she’s—’ I stop myself before I say something that will remind Aiden that he doesn’t want me around.

‘It’s late and I’m tired,’ he says, ‘and it feels a bit weird you being here. It did earlier too, but now it’s even... stranger.’

Standing up, I tell him I understand. I’m desperate to ask him when I can see Kayla again, but now is not the time. This is progress, I tell myself. Don’t push it.

‘How’s Jackie?’ Aiden asks, his question coming from nowhere. Aiden always liked Mum, so I shouldn’t be too surprised that he’s asking after her.

‘She’s... doing as well as it’s possible given her dementia.’

His eyes widen. ‘Oh, I had no idea. After you left, I tried to talk to her, to see if she knew where you were, but she wouldn’t answer. And she never returned my calls. And then suddenly her house was up for sale.’

Despite the awkwardness of our situation, I find myself telling Aiden all about Mum. How there was a final incident where she nearly set her house on fire and wasn’t safe to live on her own any more. How the doctors were quite surprised because she was only in her mid-sixties, and because it escalated so quickly. ‘She was in hospital for a while and then she lived with me for around a year until I had to... well, she went into a home just for respite care but they recommended that she stay there.’

‘You mean you gave up on her, just like you did on your daughter.’

His anger has resurfaced; I should have known it would.

‘No, it wasn’t like that. I had to work and I was struggling to look after her. I—’

‘And she didn’t ask about Kayla? About your husband?’

‘She was in hospital for so long, and I just made excuses, and then she just... seemed to forget about you. Forget that I had a family. I’m not proud of this, Aiden, and I tried to talk to her at times but then she’d forget again.’

He doesn’t say anything, once more becoming impossible to read. It used to be that I could tell what he was feeling; now he seems just as numb as I am, except when Kayla and Nicole are around. It’s time for me to go home; I’m just going to make things worse by staying here any longer.

Aiden sees me to the door, and I step out into the night.

‘I won’t let you take my daughter away from me,’ he says, pulling the door closed.

Someone is sitting on my doorstep when I get home. A small genderless figure covered up by a hooded top and loose jogging bottoms. Assuming it’s someone waiting for my downstairs neighbour, I give a small nod and fumble in my bag for my keys.

‘Miss, it’s me.’

I instantly recognise Maya’s voice and do a double take. ‘Maya! Are you okay?’

She stands up. ‘Sorry, I’ve been waiting here. You told me once you don’t really go out that much, so I assumed you’d be home eventually.’

‘You shouldn’t be out here alone at night.’

‘I had nowhere else to go. Everything’s just... a big mess.’

‘Come inside,’ I tell her. ‘We can talk properly in there.’

‘Thanks, miss.’

‘Maya, don’t you think it’s time you started calling me Eve?’

She laughs, but the sound dies abruptly in her mouth the second it’s uttered.

‘I’m sorry I missed my session yesterday,’ Maya says as soon as we’re inside my flat. ‘And for not returning your calls.’

‘I was really worried about you. It’s just not like you.’ I cross to the kitchen and fetch her a glass of water.

‘Thanks. I can’t believe you came to my house to see if I was okay. Teachers don’t normally do stuff like that, do they?’

‘Probably not, but this is a bit of a different situation. You’re *pregnant*, Maya, I’m just looking out for you.’

Her unblinking eyes stare at me, and it feels as if she’s reading far too much of me, seeing too deeply into my mind, even though I know that’s impossible. *Paranoia. That’s what this is.*

‘What did you say to my mum?’ she asks, staring at the floor.

Her aggressive tone is one I don’t recognise coming from her. My stomach lurches, forcing me to get ready for an attack. ‘I only said you hadn’t been feeling well during our last session, so I was worried about you.’

‘Really? That’s it? You didn’t say anything else?’

‘Maya, what’s going on?’

‘My parents know,’ she says, standing up and walking towards the window. I haven’t yet had a chance to pull the blinds down and the street light casts an orange glow onto her skin.

‘I’m sorry to hear that. I promise you it didn’t come from me, though. I’d never do that, Maya, it’s not my business to discuss with anyone.’

‘Well, somehow they know. And it seems a coincidence that it was straight after your visit.’ She turns to face me.

‘Did they say it was me who told them?’

She shrugs, turning away once more. ‘No, but only because they were too angry to care about where the info came from. Too busy having a go at me.’

I recall the conversation I had with Maya’s mother yesterday; nothing she said suggested she would be the type of parent who would turn against her daughter for getting pregnant at eighteen. She only came across as kind and loving, someone who would never let her children down. Have I misread the situation? It wouldn’t be the first time my instinct has let me down.

I head over to the window and ask her to look at me. ‘I’m so sorry that’s happened. Who else knew and could have told them? Could it have been Connor?’ The argument they had in the street plays through my mind; clearly something isn’t right between the two of them.

‘He would never do that,’ she says, still staring out of the window.

I shrug; this time I have truth on my side. ‘Then I don’t know what to suggest. It’s possible your mum just worked it out. Mothers often have an intuition about their children.’

‘You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?’

The floor shifts beneath me and I feel my knees buckle, fear threading through my veins. ‘What does that mean?’

‘Who the hell are you?’ she says. ‘Are you even a real teacher?’

‘Of course I am. Maya, what are you talking about?’ But I know exactly what she means.

‘You told my mum you have a daughter.’ She gestures around the flat. ‘Where is she then? Where’s this daughter? You don’t have one, do you?’

For over two years I’ve known this moment would come; a time when I’d be caught out and someone would confront me with the lie that I am. Yet despite this, I am unprepared, speechless and struggling to breathe.

I cross to the sofa and sink into it, closing my eyes for a moment. It would be easier to pile another lie on top of the one I'm already living and tell Maya it was a niece I was talking about, not a daughter, but I'm not going to deny Kayla any longer. 'Sit down, please,' I tell Maya, my voice firm and resolute. I have to take back control of this situation.

She must sense something has shifted because she does as I ask and joins me on the sofa.

'I *do* have a daughter. Her name is Kayla and she's two and a half.'

Maya's mouth drops. I don't think she expected me to open up so easily. 'I don't understand,' she says. 'Where is she?'

And that's when I tell her. Everything except the part that I will never speak aloud to anyone. There are tears sliding down Maya's cheeks by the time I've finished; a reaction I haven't anticipated.

'I never even thought about that happening,' she says. 'It must have been horrible. I can't even...' She swipes at her eyes and shakes her head. 'I'm sorry I made you... talk about this.'

'I hadn't meant to blurt it out to your mum,' I explain. 'I think it just came out because Kayla's right here in my head all the time, and I know I've got a fight ahead of me.'

'I hope you get her back,' she says, and for a few minutes the two of us sit in silence.

I have no idea what thoughts are coursing through her head, but she's still here, she's not leaving, so I comfort myself with that.

'Talking to you has really helped,' she says after a while. 'Thank you.'

'Maya, my life isn't yours. I had problems after having my baby, but that doesn't mean you will.'

She nods. 'I know you're right. I think I just needed to weigh everything up from all angles. It's good to do that, right? Before making such an important decision.'

'Of course.'

'I can't believe this is happening. I had my life all figured out. Uni, travelling, career. What's happened to me?'

I grab her hand. 'I wish I had an answer for you. I'm sorry you're going through all this, but you will work it out and do what's right for you. Things always turn out okay in the end, even though it might not feel as though they will.'

‘Do they?’ She stares at me with her wide, dark eyes. ‘Isn’t that only in books? I don’t think I believe in happy endings any more, miss. My parents hate me and I’m constantly fighting with my boyfriend. I don’t even feel connected to my friends any more. They’re not pregnant. They’re living their lives while I’m throwing up every day. I can’t do this any more!’

I tell her that she doesn’t have to do anything she doesn’t want to do and let her cry onto my shoulder. Is this what it’s like having a daughter, I think as I try to stop her shaking. And soon enough, I will do this for Kayla whenever she needs me.

Eventually Maya’s sobbing subsides and she begins to calm down. I ask her if she’s ready to go back home, and she shakes her head.

‘No way. I can’t face them. And I can’t go to Connor’s either.’

My offer comes without any internal debate, because I know what it’s like to feel so isolated, for there to be no one you can turn to. ‘You can stay here tonight. I’ll make my bed up for you with fresh sheets, and I’ll sleep on the sofa.’

‘Thank you. You don’t have to do that,’ she says.

‘Have a break from everything tonight. You’ll be able to face things in the morning and nothing will seem as bad as it does now.’

Maya nods, and I leave to go and sort my bedroom out for her.

In the morning, I knock on my bedroom door and ask Maya if she’d like some breakfast.

There’s no answer, and when I gently push open the door, I see that she’s gone, the bed neatly made.

And no sign that she was ever here.

TWENTY-THREE

Before

Mum was meant to be here twenty minutes ago. She's never late for anything. I've called her three times but there's been no answer.

Beside me, Kayla sits in her bouncer; she looks far too small for it and it seems as though her head is hunched forward. I try to straighten her up, to make her more comfortable, but she lets out a moan and starts crying.

I try Mum's phone again and leave a message. 'Mum, it's me again. Is everything okay? Are you on your way? I've got my appointment in half an hour and it will take me at least that long to get there. I hope you're okay? I'm really worried about you.'

What if something's happened to her and it's all because I've lied to her, called her over here under false pretences? She thinks I've got a hospital appointment, when the truth is that I've got an interview with a recruitment agency. Neither she nor Aiden know that I'm planning on leaving the school – I can't deal with the questions my revelation will raise. They will think I've lost my mind.

The rational side of me – if there is still one left – tries to remain calm. There are a hundred reasons why Mum could be late. Traffic might be awful or she's had some sort of emergency she's had to deal with. I shouldn't assume the worst. But it's hard to ignore the anxiety I'm riddled with.

'You won't sleep, will you?' I say to Kayla, keeping my voice gentle even though I feel like screaming. I read that even though babies this age can't understand the words you're saying, they understand tone of voice.

Gathering Kayla's things together and shoving them in her changing bag, I check her nappy and transfer her to the car seat. I'm sick with nerves about leaving the house with Kayla, but I need to check that Mum is okay.

She answers the door immediately. ‘Eve! This is a nice surprise. What are you doing here?’

For a moment I wonder whether I’ve made a mistake. Perhaps I never asked Mum to babysit after all. It’s not as though I can think straight lately. Then I remember speaking to Aiden about it, giving him the same excuse I’d given Mum about a hospital appointment. Just a routine postnatal check-up, I’d said, knowing he wouldn’t probe any further. I’d only mentioned it to cover myself, just in case Mum happened to say anything to him. That’s the trouble with lies; even the small ones pile on top of each other, ensnaring everyone around you until it all comes crashing down.

‘I came to check you’re okay,’ I tell Mum. ‘You were meant to be coming over to babysit at ten?’

She clamps her hand to her mouth. ‘Oh, yes, oh dear. I’m so sorry. What was it you had to do?’

‘A hospital appointment. I’ve missed it now.’

‘I’m so sorry. Can you call them and explain you’re running late? I can watch Kayla here for you.’ She peers past me to the car, where I have left Kayla dozing in her car seat.

My instinct tells me that I shouldn’t agree to this. With her forgetfulness, Mum is probably not safe to watch Kayla, and it’s not as if I actually have a hospital appointment. *But it’s still an emergency. I cannot go back to the past and having my interview is an important first step.*

‘Okay. I won’t be too long. Everything’s in her bag. I’ll just get her.’

‘Oh, it will be lovely having her here.’

Driving away, my mind plays over all the dreadful things that could happen to Kayla if Mum isn’t up to watching her. But still I keep my foot on the accelerator, bursting each scenario in my head as if I’m popping a balloon. I need to do this; I have no choice. And then I will feel better. Then, maybe, I will be able to feel love.

The recruitment agency woman I spoke to on the phone – Leonie – is nothing like I imagined. She sounded young on the phone, yet she must be in her fifties at least.

‘Sorry I’m so late,’ I say, holding out my hand. ‘Awful traffic.’ I don’t mention Kayla, or that I’m still on maternity leave.

Leonie flashes a smile. ‘Don’t I know it. I’ve been late to work every day this week and that never usually happens. I don’t know what’s going on. Now let’s see...’ From a file, she pulls out the CV I emailed her yesterday. ‘As I said on the phone, this is very interesting. We don’t normally get many teachers looking for admin work. That’s quite a change.’ In other words, she thinks I’m out of my mind. Teaching is supposed to be a career for life, not something you change your mind about after a few years.

‘I feel it’s time for something else,’ I explain. ‘And I do have admin experience. Before I was a teacher I worked in an office for a couple of years.’

She nods and shifts her glasses further down her nose. ‘That’s great but the problem is it might be quite hard to place you somewhere. You’ve been teaching for a few years, so employers might find it hard to accept you do actually have a broad skill set. I’ll be the first to say that teaching is definitely a profession with transferable skills, but it might not be easy for me to convince people of that.’

I try not to show my frustration. ‘I know I can do admin work. I can take on any challenge. I’m a hard worker – I just need someone to give me a chance.’

‘Well, leave it with me and I’ll see what I can do.’ She pushes up her glasses and scans my CV again. ‘I have to be honest with you, though. It’s a bit unfair for me to place you in an admin role when you’ve got your teacher training and qualifications. You see, there are people out there who only have experience in admin work, so it’s almost like taking a job from them, isn’t it?’

I stare at this woman in disbelief. Despite her enthusiasm on the phone, she has no intention of helping to find me a job. She’s wasted my time, and Mum’s time.

‘Thank you,’ I say, standing up. ‘I’ll wait to hear from you then.’

‘Yes, I’ll be in touch.’

It’s not sadness I feel as I make my way back to my car – it’s anger. Strong and intense, I’m a volcano about to erupt.

And then, when my phone rings, a number I can recall from memory appearing, I throw my phone to the ground and watch as the screen shatters.

TWENTY-FOUR

Now

With no tutoring sessions booked in, I'm free to replay the events of yesterday; how distraught Kayla was when it dawned on her that Aiden and Nicole weren't there. 'I want Mummy!' she'd cried repeatedly. Followed by, 'Where's Daddy?' Her sadness almost broke me, and all I wanted to do was hold her tightly and comfort her. I kept my distance, though, instead distracting her with silly faces and funny games. But in Kayla's mind, and in her heart, Nicole is her mother. It was just through sheer tiredness that she happened to fall asleep on me.

This is what I think about as I clear away paperwork and make a half-hearted attempt at tidying the flat. As I strip the sheets off the bed, I wonder why Maya left without saying anything.

I send Nicole a text message to see how she is, but even after an hour there is no reply.

Jamie FaceTimes as I sit down to eat breakfast, his unshaven face filling the screen so I can't help but notice the large dark circles under his eyes.

'How's your mum?' I ask.

He shakes his head. 'Not too good. She's not speaking very well, slurring her words and stuttering, but the doctors have said that's to be expected after a stroke.'

'I'm so sorry, Jamie. That's definitely what it was, then?'

'Yeah, looks like it.' He flicks his eyes to the ceiling. 'It's so weird. I mean, you know your parents are getting older and things could happen but when it actually does it's still a shock. It's bloody awful.'

Now is the time to tell him I understand this, that I live with it every day. Perhaps explaining about Mum will bring us closer together. Maybe that is what I want. *But then how do I tell him about Kayla? About who I really am. It's such a huge thing to withhold. And where will it lead?*

'My mum's in a care home,' I say. This is safe ground, this is all I have to tell him for the moment, and maybe sharing my story will help him in some way. 'She lived with me for a while until I just couldn't manage any more. I

couldn't keep her safe no matter what I did. She kept disappearing and putting herself in danger. It broke me to do it but it was the safest thing.'

On my phone screen, Jamie's eyes widen. 'I'm sorry,' he says. 'I had no idea.' There is no accusation there, no *why didn't you mention this before?* and I'm grateful for this.

'It makes you realise, doesn't it?' he continues, 'that we never know what's about to happen to us in the next minute. I need to start living my life more. What's it they say? *Carpe diem*. Seize the day or something like that.'

'Actually, I think it means *pluck* the day, but that doesn't sound as good, does it?'

Jamie laughs. 'Trust you to know that. I can tell you're an English teacher.'

Maybe he does understand me a tiny bit. For these last three months he must have been paying attention, even while I deliberately wasn't.

'*Seize* does sound better,' he says. 'And that's what I'm going to do. When I get back let's do something different. Go somewhere we've never been. Have a real experience. Together.'

I don't hesitate this time. 'I'd like that.'

'Let me think of something we can do, then,' Jamie says. He's clearly perked up in the last couple of minutes, and even the dark circles underlining his eyes appear to have shrunk. 'Anyway, I'd better go. Dad wants to go for a walk while Mum's sleeping. I'll probably drive back home tomorrow, or the day after. One of my sisters is on her way from France, and she can stay for as long as necessary. God help Mum! Amy's a complete nightmare and will be more trouble than she is help.' He lets out a deep breath which turns into a whistle. 'I wish I could stay up here longer, but there's nobody to cover at work this week. I'll text you later, okay?'

Once he's gone, I call Aiden. Even though he won't like it, I have to check how Nicole is. And it worries me that she hasn't replied to my message. He answers just as I'm about to give up.

'Eve,' he says, 'I can't talk now.'

'I was just calling to see how Nicole is?'

In the background a scream erupts, and Aiden muffles the phone.

'Is that Kayla? What's going on?'

'I said I can't talk right now,' he hisses.

'Is Kayla okay?'

‘She’s fine. She’s just upset. She wants Nicole and doesn’t understand why she’s not here.’

‘So she’s still in hospital?’

‘Yes, and I was supposed to be at work over an hour ago.’

‘I’ll come over and help,’ I say, already standing up to gather my things. ‘Traffic shouldn’t be too bad now, so I can be there in about forty minutes.’

‘No. No way. We’ll manage.’

‘How? Nicole’s mum is away and your parents are in Scotland. Sophie’s at work, so who else is there?’

‘I do have other friends, Eve.’

‘Can they come right now?’

Silence.

‘Right, I’m leaving now.’ I hang up before he can say another word; I’m not going to miss this opportunity.

Aiden scowls as he opens the door. Thankfully, Kayla is clinging to his leg so he stays quiet and lets me in. In her other hand she clutches her bunny.

‘Hi, Kayla, I’m here to look after you for a little bit while your daddy goes to work.’

She stares at me and nods. ‘My mummy’s in *hop-sit-al*,’ she says, and I can’t help but smile at her pronunciation.

Crouching down to her level, I take her hand. ‘Yes, she is. And the doctors are making her all better so she can come home very soon to be with you.’

I stand up again and face Aiden. ‘Is there any news?’

‘Her scan’s in an hour, so hopefully they’ll know more then.’ He ruffles Kayla’s hair. ‘We need to brush this, don’t we?’

‘I can do that,’ I say, but Aiden has already turned away, leading Kayla into the kitchen.

Following them inside and closing the front door behind me, I notice the mess and clutter that has spread through the house since Nicole hasn’t been here; a sure sign that he needs her around.

In the kitchen, Aiden brushes Kayla’s hair. She’s still got hold of her bunny and she strokes its ears. ‘This is Flopsy,’ she says, holding it up to me. ‘Mummy got her for me.’

I lean forward and take a close look. ‘She’s lovely, I wonder if she wants some breakfast?’

Kayla’s eyes light up. ‘Yippee! Let’s make it.’ She points to a small toy kitchen in the corner of the room. I didn’t notice it the last time I was here, although that’s hardly surprising when I felt so overwhelmed in this house. Somehow today it feels different, as if I might actually fit in here. It’s too early to assume I can just slot into Kayla’s life, though, but for now I will live in this moment.

‘Kayla,’ Aiden says, ‘can you find Flopsy’s hat? I think it’s in your room.’ He puts down her hairbrush, and she rushes off.

‘Just so you know,’ he continues, turning to me, ‘I’m not happy about this at all. But all I can think about right now is Nicole so...’

‘Kayla will be fine with me, Aiden. Just like she was the other night.’

‘This doesn’t change anything,’ he says, gathering his wallet and keys and stuffing them into his pocket.

‘You don’t have to be so angry with me all the time, Aiden. Can’t we just try to move forward?’ I whisper this because I can hear Kayla thundering down the stairs.

He ignores me. ‘This won’t be for long. Nicole will be fine and then—’

‘Daddy! Got it!’ Kayla flies into the room, waving a small yellow hat above her head. She fumbles around trying to place it on the bunny, but it continually slides off.

‘Let me help,’ I say, and Kayla nods.

‘Bye, sweetheart,’ Aiden says, kissing her forehead.

And then he is gone, and I am alone with my daughter. Nobody watching over us.

It feels like only minutes have passed before Aiden is opening the front door and calling Kayla’s name. His face drops when I appear in the hallway alone.

‘We’re playing hide and seek,’ I explain. ‘Kayla’s hiding in the kitchen.’

He nods and peels off his jacket, dumping it on the shoe cabinet instead of hanging it on a hook. In his haste to get to the kitchen he doesn’t notice it drop to the floor.

‘She’s fine, Aiden. Everything’s been fine,’ I say to his back. I don’t tell him that I also found time to tidy the house. As distraught as he is, perhaps he will never notice.

Kayla squeals when she realises Aiden is home, and I loiter in the hallway to give them a moment together. I’m grateful that the two of them have such a strong bond, that he has given her a good life in spite of me.

I stay where I am and close my eyes, allowing the sound of laughter to wrap around me, to lift me up. I know this serenity will only last a moment.

Kayla rushes into the hallway, snapping me back to the present. ‘Eve, Eve, Daddy’s home!’

‘Yes, that’s good, isn’t it?’

She nods and grabs my hand, shocking me with how tiny and soft her own hand feels. I’m not used to this. The only children I have anything to do with are my students, all of whom are years older than Kayla. ‘Come and see my daddy!’

In the kitchen, Aiden is rooting through the fridge, while Kayla runs through the open back door into the garden. ‘I visited Nicole in my lunch break so I could come straight home to Kayla.’

‘How’s she doing?’

‘Tired and in a lot of pain. We have to wait for her results, but she’s going to be all right, I know it.’

I nod. ‘I’m happy to hear that. Look, I’ll get going now and leave you to it. Unless you need me for anything?’

He shrugs and doesn’t look up. ‘I suppose you can stay for some food. If you’re hungry.’

I try to contain my surprise. ‘Are you sure? I don’t want to get in the way.’

‘Stay or don’t stay. Whichever.’

This is as good as I’m going to get from him. ‘I will, then. Thanks.’

He frowns. ‘Judging by the contents of this fridge, it will have to be spaghetti.’

I tell him this sounds good, and he snorts.

‘Really? You never used to like it. You always said that any kind of pasta is dull.’

‘Well, maybe I’m a different person now.’ I wish I could make him see that.

He raises his eyes. ‘I’ll just put Kayla to bed first.’

‘Can I do it?’ The second I ask I know it’s a mistake, that I’m pushing him too far, too soon.

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea. What will Kayla think if I let some stranger put her to bed when her dad’s right here?’

I stare at him, smarting from his cruelty, even though I understand it. ‘I’m not a stranger, Aiden.’ My voice is a whisper, despite Kayla being at the back of the garden, too far away to hear us.

Watching our daughter from the window, he ignores me again. ‘I really don’t need this,’ he mutters to himself.

‘What about if I just came upstairs with you? I’d love to see her proper bedtime routine.’ My heart thuds in my chest; I’m desperate for him to agree, to let me in just a fraction.

Seconds fly by without any response from Aiden, until eventually he heads to the door and calls out. ‘Come on, Kayla, it’s bedtime now and Eve’s going to help us.’

Kayla runs to the door and jumps into Aiden’s arms. ‘Can she read me a story? I want *The Gruffalo*.’

Aiden raises his eyebrows, clearly as surprised as I am. ‘Yes, of course,’ he says, heading out of the kitchen with our daughter in his arms.

Later, once Kayla’s asleep, we sit down to eat. To start with, Aiden’s frosty silence makes it a bizarre experience: we are two people who can’t speak to each other sharing a meal together. But by the time we’ve finished, it feels as though Aiden has warmed to me – even if only a fraction – and we find ourselves discussing friends we used to know. Laughing even. As if time has erased itself.

‘Hi.’

I turn and Nicole is standing in the doorway.

Aiden’s cheeks redden, and he quickly stands, stumbling over his words. ‘Nic, are you okay? What’s happened? You’re supposed to be in the hospital.’ He rushes over to her and gently hugs her.

‘I discharged myself. I couldn’t stand to be in that place for another second.’ She turns from Aiden to me. ‘I’m guessing Aiden needed you to babysit? Thank you so much for helping, Eve. I really appreciate it.’

Aiden frowns. 'But you need to wait for your results. I can't believe they let you leave.'

Nicole explains that she had to sign a form to state that she was leaving against the doctor's recommendation. 'It's just to cover themselves. I'll be fine.' She turns to me. 'Is someone going to get me some food, then?' She tries to laugh but it obviously hurts her stomach.

'You need to sit down,' Aiden says. 'There's no spaghetti left but I'll get you something else.'

'I was only joking, I'm not actually hungry. Stop fussing.'

I need to explain my presence here to Nicole, even though nothing about her suggests she is jumping to any wrong conclusions. 'I came over this morning to watch Kayla so Aiden could go to work. He didn't want me to but he was desperate.'

Aiden takes Nicole's hand. 'She's right. I didn't have much choice.'

'I'm glad you could come,' Nicole says. 'It's the right thing for Kayla.'

'She's missed you so much,' Aiden says, kissing Nicole's forehead.

Nicole nods. 'I'll have to spoil her tomorrow. Take her somewhere nice.'

'You're not going anywhere until we find out what's wrong,' Aiden says. 'I'm taking the day off work so I can look after both of you.'

'Let's just see how I feel in the morning.'

I tell them both I need to get back to my flat. 'I'm glad you're feeling well enough to come home, Nicole. Please let me know if I can help with anything.'

'Thank you so much, Eve.'

Neither of them sees me to the door, and as I walk away I can't help but feel disappointed that Nicole came home early.

TWENTY-FIVE

Before

‘She’s beautiful. Such a doll. She looks just like you, Eve.’

Aiden’s mother is standing over Kayla’s cot, gazing down at her with a smile that’s ready to burst from her face. This is the first time she’s met Kayla and all she’s done since she arrived is gawp at her, repeatedly telling me how much she is my doppelganger. It’s bizarre how much people love to comment on who a baby looks like, as if it is a huge shock that they could actually resemble their parents. Still, I’m grateful that Marie and Pete are here.

‘And she definitely has Aiden’s ears, don’t you think? His were exactly the same when he was little. Sticking out just ever so slightly! So cute!’ She guffaws and reaches down to stroke Kayla’s cheek.

Don’t wake her up! I need her to keep sleeping.

Marie’s attachment to her granddaughter was immediate – an unbreakable bond – yet here I am still waiting for love to overwhelm me.

At least for the next week I will have company, and perhaps that will help me to feel normal again. Maybe Marie will be able to comfort Kayla where I can’t.

Marie finally turns away from Kayla and looks me up and down. ‘Are you okay, Eve? You look exhausted. You know, you must rest while Pete and I are here. We may have only brought Aiden home when he was seven months old, but I can imagine how hard these early days are. Anyway, we’re here to help and do whatever you need us to do.’ She reaches out her arms, and I turn away, pretending I haven’t noticed. I can’t bear to be hugged by anyone.

‘Thank you, Marie. We’re so grateful for your help.’ I need Marie to think I have everything under control, that everything is normal. Thankfully, I managed to clean the house before they arrived, even though it meant leaving Kayla to scream in her bouncer. Keeping her close to me, where she could see me, made no difference. It never does.

‘Where’s my little angel, then?’ Pete’s voice booms into the room, and in her cot Kayla stirs.

‘Shhh, keep your voice down, she’s asleep!’ Marie tuts.

‘Oops, sorry. I’m just excited to see her.’ Pete steps into the room. ‘Ah, there she is – sleeping beauty. So angelic, isn’t she?’

Yes, because she’s asleep. Wait until she wakes up and then you will see a different baby.

Pete embraces me. ‘Lovely to see you, Eve. Sorry we couldn’t come sooner. Marie’s been champing at the bit to get here. Driving me crazy!’

Marie slaps him gently on the arm. ‘Of course I’ve been desperate to see Kayla. She’s my first grandchild.’

And last from us, I almost say. Definitely the last.

Pete winks at me. ‘Don’t expect to see your baby for the next week, love!’

His words lift me up, release me. What’s wrong with me? Most new mothers would be terrified of their newborn baby being whisked off by their mother-in-law, yet I am already desperate for Marie to take over with Kayla.

‘Although you do look like you could do with some rest,’ Pete adds.

Marie nods. ‘She does. Tell you what, how about when Aiden gets home from work the two of you go out for dinner by yourselves? We’ll watch Kayla and put her to bed. Oh, I know you don’t want to leave her but it will do you the world of good, so I won’t take no for an answer.’ She smiles, satisfied that she’s got everything all planned out.

I pretend to mull this over, to be struggling with saying yes. ‘Well, okay, I guess it couldn’t hurt for an hour or two. If you’re sure?’

‘Take as long as you need. All you have to do is show us where everything is and we’ll be fine. Stay out all night if you want to.’

‘This feels weird, doesn’t it?’ Aiden says, lifting his glass of wine and staring at it as if he’s unsure what to do with it. ‘I keep turning to see where Kayla is.’ He takes a sip. ‘It’s nice to be out for a change, though, isn’t it?’

He has no idea just how true that is for me. I feel like I can breathe again as the tension drains from my body. Now, for a couple of hours at least, only Aiden and I exist. ‘How’s work?’ I ask. I have to steer him off the subject of Kayla. ‘Sorry I never have a chance to ask you properly.’

‘It’s a bit stressful at the moment. The restructuring means everything’s up in the air and it’s creating a lot of uncertainty. I know I’ll be okay, but I feel bad for everyone who won’t be.’

This is news to me. How can I not be aware of something so important going on with Aiden? My anxiety has overwhelmed me so much that I haven’t paused for even a second to listen to what Aiden has been telling me.

‘I’m sorry, I know you told me, I just—’

‘Hey, it’s fine. You’ve been busy with Kayla, and I know it’s all-consuming at the moment.’

Yes, but it’s not the endless cycle of changing nappies, feeding and winding – it’s the fact that I can’t seem to love my daughter. I wish I could tell Aiden this, put it out there once and for all and share my truth. But I can’t do that to him; he is happy and I won’t strip that from him. ‘It’s no excuse for not listening to you,’ I say.

He takes my hand. ‘Listen, you’ve given me Kayla, the most amazing gift I could ask for, so I’m not going to moan about you not listening when I drone on about work.’

Our food comes, and I savour every mouthful of my risotto, relishing the fact that I can eat without being interrupted, without having to hurry. I don’t want this evening to end. I want us to be the people we were before we wanted to be parents.

Then my phone rings, shattering the peace in my mind. I leave it in my bag, try to buy myself a few moments to think of an excuse for not answering.

Opposite me, Aiden is frowning. ‘Aren’t you going to get that?’

‘No, this is our special night.’

‘It could be your mum, though.’

He’s right. I at least need to check to see. I reach into my bag, but thankfully the phone stops ringing. I check it, the broken screen still clear enough to read. My stomach plummets when I see that number again. ‘It’s not Mum,’ I say. ‘Just one of those nuisance numbers.’

‘So annoying,’ Aiden says, focusing on his food once again.

And now I need to do the same, as difficult as it is. ‘I’ve had an idea,’ I say, leaning forward. ‘Why don’t we go away, just for a couple of nights? It doesn’t have to be anywhere too far. It would be nice to get out of London for a change, wouldn’t it?’

Aiden's eyes widen. 'I don't know... Kayla's a bit young, don't you think? And she's still not a great sleeper. It might be a bit difficult doing all the night feeds away from home.'

'Actually, I meant just the two of us. Your mum and dad could babysit – they'd love that. I mean, Marie practically forced us out tonight, didn't she? I think she would love any chance she could get to have Kayla on her own.'

I wait for Aiden to smile, but it doesn't come. Instead, a frown appears on his forehead. He's supposed to look happy, relieved that I've suggested this. He's not meant to be staring at me as if I'm trying to convince him to give Kayla away to the people at the next table.

'I don't know, Eve. Leaving her for a couple of hours when she's asleep at night is a bit different from going away for a few days. We can't – she's too young. What if she freaks out and thinks we've abandoned her?'

And with his words I plummet to the ground. How stupid I've been to hope that just for a short space of time I could escape. 'You're right,' I say, fighting back not tears but rage. 'We can't leave her. I don't know what I was thinking.'

Before Aiden says anything else, I excuse myself to go to the toilets, rushing into a cubicle where I slam my fists against the wall. I stare at the toilet and imagine smashing my head against it until there is nothing left of me and no more pain left to feel.

'Are you okay?' Aiden asks when I get back to the table. 'I was about to send out a search party.'

'I just felt a bit nauseous,' I explain. 'Better now, though.'

'Good. Maybe your food was a bit off? Ha, if I didn't know any better I'd wonder if it was morning sickness, but, well...'

I'm grateful that he doesn't finish this thought. I don't need him to remind me that for so long now I've been too exhausted for any kind of intimacy.

'Shall we get dessert?' I'm not hungry but neither am I ready to go home yet. I need this moment to last as long as possible.

'Never say no to dessert,' Aiden says, grinning. How quickly he's able to move on from anything negative in our lives. How does he not see that everything is falling apart?

I've bought us some more time here in this restaurant, but the minutes tick by loudly in my head; a constant reminder that this time will soon be over.

On the way home, while Aiden drives the short distance to our house, I close my eyes and pray that I never have to wake up.

TWENTY-SIX

Now

When my phone rings the next morning – Nicole’s name flashing on my screen – my first reaction is panic that something’s happened to Kayla. Guilt and anxiety merge into one to immediately make me assume the worst. That I am too late.

‘Hi, it’s Nicole.’

‘Is something wrong?’ I ask.

‘No, course not. Everything’s fine. But I do have a favour to ask. Aiden’s working today, and I’ve got something urgent I need to do. Would you be free for just a few hours to look after Kayla this afternoon? I’ll pick her up later.’

I’m stunned by her request. Even though Aiden was civil towards me yesterday, I assumed that was only because he was worried about Nicole. I had fully expected to have a fight on my hands again just to get to see her. I had prepared myself for a war.

‘Of course I will. Does Aiden know?’

‘Oh, hang on. Kayla, no, sweetheart, you can’t have Mummy’s iPad. Sorry, Eve. No, Aiden doesn’t know. He seems to have already forgotten just how much you’ve helped us. I’m sorry. We’ll get through to him, though. Look, I’ll have to go, but could you pick her up in an hour?’

‘We’re just going to visit someone, Kayla. Someone very important to me.’

I don’t know when the idea to take Kayla to visit Mum occurred to me but now we’re on our way – with me driving as fast as I safely can so as not to waste any time – it feels like the only thing that makes sense. I have only a few hours, and with Aiden still reluctant to let me into Kayla’s life, there’s no telling when I’ll get another opportunity like this.

‘Who?’ Kayla asks, and in the rear-view mirror I see her shuffling around in her car seat.

‘My mummy. She’s not feeling very well, and I thought we could both cheer her up.’

‘I’ve got a mummy too!’ she exclaims. ‘I love my mummy!’

‘Yes, you have, and she loves you, too.’ I force myself to smile. Nicole has been so nice to me, and I loathe myself for resenting her, for believing that if it was just Aiden and Kayla then I would have got through to him by now.

When we arrive, despite my earlier determination to bring Kayla to Mum, I begin to have doubts. There’s no predicting how Mum will react to anything, and I fear this won’t be the reunion my heart wants it to be. There’s every chance Mum will freak out, or Kayla will get scared; anything’s possible with Mum’s disease.

For Kayla’s sake, I push aside the doubts and take her inside the building, my heart soaring when she reaches to grab my hand.

‘Who’s this little beauty, then?’ Silvia, one of the carers, asks. She’s standing by the reception desk, gathering some papers together.

‘This is Kayla, my friend’s daughter,’ I explain. ‘I’m babysitting and thought it would be nice for Mum to have some company other than just mine.’

Silvia crouches down to Kayla’s level and tells her it’s lovely to meet her. ‘Jackie will be so happy to see you. She loves seeing the little ones whenever they come to visit someone; this will make her day.’

I’m not sure how true this is – especially when Mum rarely leaves her room, but I’m grateful that Silvia is helping to make Kayla feel comfortable.

Outside Mum’s door, I take a deep breath. It’s impossible to know how this will go, but I’m here now so there’s no way out of it.

‘Eve, is that you?’

I’m about to greet her until I realise it’s not me Mum’s addressing, but Kayla. She reaches out and strokes her cheek.

Kayla giggles. ‘I’m not Eve. I’m Kayla!’

This information is unimportant to Mum, and she continues staring at her granddaughter, taking in every inch of her. ‘Oh, you’re such a beautiful little girl, aren’t you? Now, why haven’t you come to see me for so long?’

Another giggle, and then Kayla trots into the room, throwing herself on the bed. She reaches into her bag of toys and pulls out a small hairbrush and her doll.

‘How are you doing, Mum?’ I ask. I long to hug her, but since dementia took control of her brain, she recoils at most physical contact.

‘Oh, I’m still waiting for that bus,’ she replies, raising her eyebrows and drawing closer to me. ‘Do you know, I think they’re just trying to keep me here! I can’t understand why. Nobody needs any piano lessons.’

It is particularly poignant to hear Mum say this. She’d been a piano teacher for many years, right up to her early sixties. Despite there being a piano in the residents’ lounge downstairs, Mum hasn’t touched even a key for at least two years.

‘It’s okay, Mum. The bus will be here later – you won’t miss it.’

She studies my face, wrinkling her own as if working out whether she believes me. ‘Oh, that’s good.’ She turns to Kayla, who, thankfully, is too engrossed in her doll to pay attention to our conversation. ‘Now, young lady, who’s this dolly, then?’

While I get Kayla a snack, I watch the two of them with equal measures of pain and delight circling through me. They both speak so animatedly together that it’s hard to believe they are strangers. *Not strangers, though, not really. They are family, bonded by blood, no matter the circumstances. I want to be able to come here all the time with Kayla, to see the joy on Mum’s face again. Only Aiden and Nicole are standing in my way, even though Nicole doesn’t realise that she is.*

With Mum and Kayla so engrossed in their chat, I’m the only one who notices when there’s a knock on the door and Silvia pokes her head around it. ‘Hi, sorry to interrupt but could I have a quick word in private, please?’

I stand up and head to the door.

‘It’s just to go through a query with your direct debit,’ she says, keeping her voice low, even though it’s unlikely Mum would understand what she’s talking about. ‘Not your fault, of course, our system crashed, so we’re having to get everyone to submit another form.’

I glance at Mum and Kayla, and even though both of them are clearly at ease with one another, there’s no way I can leave them here alone, not even for a minute.

‘That’s fine, but do you think someone could come in and stay with Mum and Kayla for a minute?’

She nods. ‘Of course. Let me just grab Ryan.’

Once I’ve sorted out the direct debit form, I rush back to the room to find Mum and Kayla still enjoying each other’s company. Somehow Kayla has

put the hugest smile on Mum's face, something I haven't seen for a long time. *This is meant to be – the pieces of my family put back together again. Whatever I have to do to keep it this way doesn't matter.*

'Eve, can we talk? I'm outside your flat.'

I've just put on my pyjamas, so the last thing I'm expecting is company. Especially Nicole's. And there is no good reason I can think of for her turning up like this. She must have found out I took Kayla to see Mum without checking with them first. 'I, um. Okay. Come in.' I press the buzzer and hear the front door open, having just enough time to throw on my dressing gown before she's standing in front of me. I prepare to defend myself.

'I'm sorry it's late,' Nicole says, smiling apologetically. Her eyes fix on my dressing gown. 'Oh no, I didn't think you'd be in bed.'

'I wasn't. I just like to get comfortable in the evening.' She still isn't confronting me, so I offer her something to drink.

'No, thanks. I can't stay long. Aiden will be wondering where I am.' She steps into my flat and glances around. 'I just wanted to thank you for today. It was really kind of you to step in at such short notice.'

She could have said this on the phone. There's something else going on here.

'Kayla's been so distraught about me being ill, and you really helped take her mind off everything. With your mum's help of course.'

There it is. This is what she has come here for. 'Nicole, I'm really sorry. I didn't plan to take Kayla there, it's just that I always visit Mum. I didn't have a chance to ask you on the phone, or when I picked her up.'

She holds up her hand. 'Oh, please don't apologise. I actually think it's lovely that your mum got to see her. I'm assuming you didn't mention who she is, though?'

I shake my head. 'No, of course not. And even if I did, Mum's not in a good state to remember anyway.'

Nicole reaches for my arm. 'Aiden told me. I'm so sorry. I'm really close to my mum so I can only imagine how hard it is for you both.'

'Will you come and sit down? You've only just been in hospital.' I head to the sofa, and Nicole follows. 'Does Aiden know?'

‘No. I didn’t tell him, but...’ And then tears are trickling down her cheeks, which she vigorously tries to swipe away.

Instinctively I move closer to her and place my arm across her shoulders. ‘Nicole, what is it? What’s happened?’

‘This feels so strange, I’m not sure I should even be talking about it. Aiden would feel so... betrayed.’

‘Please trust me, Nicole – nothing you say here will ever get back to Aiden, I promise you that.’ The irony is that I’m expecting her to trust me when I don’t even know if I can trust myself. If I had to break my promise to Nicole in order to get my daughter back then I would do it like a shot.

Nicole takes her time but eventually she begins to talk. ‘Things have been a bit... strained between Aiden and me lately. We used to always be a team, especially when it came to parenting, but now it feels as though we can’t agree on anything. There’s this horrible tension between us all the time and... it’s just hard to deal with.’

This is my fault. I have done this to them. ‘I’m so sorry. I never wanted to cause problems for you both. When I came back, I didn’t even know Aiden was with anyone—’

‘Please don’t think I’m blaming you, Eve. This is not your fault. All you’ve done is come back to try and be in Kayla’s life – I could never blame you for that. I would have done exactly the same thing.’ She turns away. ‘The problem is that Aiden just doesn’t see this. And I’ve been pushing and pushing him, and now I feel like he’s turning away from me.’

‘Oh, Nicole, I’m so sorry.’

‘Aiden’s a good man. You know that – you were married to him. He goes out of his way for people and is the most amazing father to Kayla.’

There is something surreal about talking to my ex-husband’s new partner about the man I was married to. Still am, technically. Nicole might be with Aiden now but there is a whole side to him that she can never know. She will never see the man he was when we were together. I believe that she’s tried to get through to him, but I’m convinced I would stand a better chance if I could just reach the person he was, the person he still must be somewhere inside him. Nicole, as nice as she is, is the one who is preventing that.

‘I know all this,’ I tell her. ‘I just need him to understand *me*.’

Nicole grabs my hand. ‘Please, Eve – I’m begging you, please can you just give us some space for a while? Time for Aiden to get used to

everything without me putting pressure on him. I just don't know what damage it will do to our relationship if things carry on as they are. I'm still totally on your side with this – I want Kayla to have you in her life – but I'm just asking you to be patient.'

Seconds tick by, Nicole's words – and what they mean for me – crashing around my head. 'How long?' I ask. 'You're asking me to stay away but for how long?'

She shakes her head. 'I don't know. For however long Aiden needs.'

'Okay,' I say. 'I see I have no choice.'

'And there's one more thing. Don't you think it's time, maybe, that you got a divorce?'

Even though she's right, I'm stunned that she's bringing this up now. 'What does Aiden say about it?'

'It's what he wants. And I'm sure it's what you want too?'

I nod. 'Then all he has to do is ask. I would never keep him tied to me.'

'Good. Thank you,' she says, leaning forward to embrace me. 'Thank you so much, Eve.'

I see her to the front door and watch as she gets in her car. There are always casualties in a war, I think.

That's not going to stop me.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Before

They say babies can pick up on how their mothers are feeling and it somehow affects their behaviour. Before having Kayla I was sceptical about this. It's not as though babies are born with some kind of sixth sense, are they? Yet now I know there's truth to this.

Nothing I do soothes Kayla, yet the second she's in Aiden's arms all the tension in her tiny body releases itself and she's suddenly at peace. The second she feels herself in his arms. I don't resent her or Aiden for this; it's just one thing to add to the long list of reasons why I shouldn't be a mother.

'It's because you're always with her, and I'm a novelty,' Aiden says, and I wonder how he can't see what's staring him directly in the face.

Today she's been whining all morning, so I decide I'll take her to the park. It's on a main road, meaning the roar of the traffic might drown out her cries. Anything is better than sitting in this house waiting for the walls to crush me.

Miraculously, Kayla falls asleep before we arrive at the park, so I grab a takeaway cup of tea from the coffee shop and sit on a bench, pushing Kayla's pram backwards and forwards in the hopes of keeping her asleep.

An elderly lady walks over and joins me, smiling down at my sleeping baby.

'Just beautiful,' she says.

Out of politeness I nod, keeping inside the words I really want to say; words that would shock anyone listening and prove once and for all that she should be taken away from me.

The lady turns to me. 'You look exhausted, dear. I hope you're taking care of yourself too. It's all well and good people fussing over new babies but who takes the time to ask the mothers how they're doing?'

'Yes,' I say. 'Yes, you're right. That's exactly how I feel.'

She smiles. 'You do everything for that little one, don't you, with barely any acknowledgement? Hardest job in the world, I say. Well, you're doing a grand job. Just look at her. Not a care in the world.'

I want to reach for this lady – this stranger – and wrap my arms around her. Since giving birth to Kayla she might be the first person who's actually considered *me*. Aiden, of course, is doing his best, but he's so consumed with Kayla that I don't think he's had any room in his mind to fit me in, just as I haven't with him.

'So how many children do you have?' I ask, wondering whether someone who understands so much could ever face having a second child.

'Me? Oh, no, dear. I made the decision long ago not to have any, and to this day it's been the best choice I've ever made.' She smiles.

I'm so stunned by her declaration, and the force with which she delivers it, that I can't find any words to offer a reply.

'Anyway, I'll be going now. I only sat down to rest my legs for a minute before I get to the supermarket. You take care now.'

Watching her walk away, I feel even worse than I did before I spoke to her. But why? She didn't say anything to insult me, and even if she didn't want children, she still understood that a mother needs care too.

Screams of joy erupt from the playground, and I turn to watch a young mum with her two children. They're probably around two and four, and she seems to be managing both of them with ease, negotiating both of their different needs while remaining calm. She's another Sophie: strong and capable. I try to tell myself this will get easier – and maybe one day I'll be like Sophie and the mum I'm watching now – but then I look down at my tiny baby and she seems a lifetime away from the children in the playground.

It shouldn't surprise me when I glance at Kayla and find her staring at me. 'Well, that nap was all of five minutes,' I say.

On the bench next to me, I notice a chocolate wrapper. 'I need to put this in the bin over there,' I tell Kayla. 'Just stay here for a minute.'

The bin is near the entrance to the park, and I head over to it.

And then I keep walking past it, not once glancing back.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Now

It's just gone seven a.m. when Jamie calls the next morning. 'Can we see each other?' he asks.

The memory of Nicole being in my flat last night, and everything she said to me, is still pounding in my head. I can't blame her; Aiden is the one who has made this difficult – he is the one I have to deal with.

'Eve? Can you hear me?' I turn my attention to Jamie. He is the one I need to focus on now, along with Kayla of course. And now it is time to tell him about my daughter. Maybe he can help me find a way to get her back.

'What's happened? Is your mum okay?' I ask.

'Yeah, she's all right. My sister's there now, so at least Dad's got some help.' He pauses. 'Can we meet this morning?'

'Of course. Do you want to come over here?'

'Can we make it somewhere central? I've got a lunch meeting with a client in Leicester Square. Can you be there by ten?'

I tell him I'll see him there, and hang up, my curiosity piqued by his request to meet this morning when it's a full working day for him.

He's there before me, standing outside the station, engrossed in something on his phone. It surprises me that he made it here before me – I'm usually the one who arrives first.

'Hi,' I say, reaching to hug him.

He pulls away from me, his body tense. 'Let's walk.'

I know Jamie isn't big on public displays of affection – and neither am I – but I know instantly there's something else going on here. Nothing about his manner or body language is right. 'Okay. We can grab a coffee and find somewhere to sit.'

'I don't have time for a coffee,' he says. 'This won't take long.' He's barely looking at me as he says this.

‘I thought your meeting was at lunchtime?’

Jamie stares ahead. ‘It is. But this won’t take long.’

I stop walking and tug at his sleeve. ‘What’s going on?’

He scans the area then points. ‘There’s a bench over there. Come on.’ He walks off, and I follow, unease rapidly spreading through my body. This is out of character for Jamie. I expect this frostiness from Aiden – but Jamie?

As soon as we’re sitting, he turns to me, his eyes hard and cold. He has become a different person. ‘Did you ever want things to work with us?’ he asks, almost spitting his words at me.

‘Yes, of course I did. Where’s this coming from?’

Jamie stares at the ground, his white trainers kicking at dust on the pavement. He still doesn’t look at me. ‘I find that hard to believe.’

‘What’s this about, Jamie? I know I’ve been distant but I thought we were past that. We were going away together to see your parents before your mum got ill. I don’t do things like that lightly. You mean a lot to me and I’m sorry about how I’ve been before.’

Nothing changes in his expression, even though he must know how difficult it is for me to bare my soul like this.

‘You might be many things, Eve, but I never had you down as a liar.’ He stares right at me now, his eyes burning into me so intensely that I feel my face flushing, even though I’m not sure what he’s talking about. That’s the trouble with being guilty – it never leaves you, even if the current situation has nothing to do with what you’ve done.

‘What are you talking about? I know I’ve—’

‘Cut the bullshit, Eve. Just tell me the truth.’

‘About what?’ But suddenly I know without Jamie having to explain. He knows who I am, what I’ve done. About Kayla. *There’s no way he can know the rest, though. No way anyone can.*

‘At first I was angry with you because you’d lied to me. Then the more I thought about it the more I realised I could never be with a person who could walk away from their own baby. It just doesn’t bear thinking about.’ He shakes his head. ‘I want to have my own kids one day so this is just... awful. The whole thing makes me sick to my stomach. I don’t know who the hell you are.’ He turns away.

So many thoughts flash through my mind as we sit here in this tableau, frozen, while all around us the world carries on. To anyone passing we will

look like a normal couple, sharing some time together. Nobody would be able to tell that both our worlds have just shattered.

There are several things I could say to Jamie right now, one of them being an apology, yet somehow I can't manage it. 'There are two sides to every story, Jamie.'

He shakes his head. 'Not when it comes to abandoning a *baby*. There's nothing you can say that will make that okay. What the hell, Eve? I knew you were separated, but Jesus, this has well and truly winded me. I can't even look at you.'

One thing I've learned in life is that sometimes it shows strength to admit when you're defeated. To protest and try to force someone round to your way of thinking only hurts both people. I won't do that to Jamie, especially when, ultimately, he is right. I did a terrible thing and losing him is just another price I will have to pay. How ironic that it comes at a time when I'd just begun to let him in, when I was actually ready to tell him everything myself.

'I'm not going to try and change your mind,' I say, fighting back tears I refuse to let out. I won't make him feel guilty. 'I'm sorry I didn't tell you.'

He doesn't accept my apology. 'You let me get invested in *us* and all the time you were holding back something so... I can't even describe it. I thought I loved you, Eve. Ha, that's a joke, isn't it? Because you were never the person I fell for.'

Instinctually, I reach for his arm, but he yanks it away, moving further from me on the bench. 'You're right. I wasn't. I'm sorry.'

'Save it, Eve. I'm not even the one you need to say sorry to, am I?' He shakes his head again, the disgust he's feeling almost palpable.

'Will you at least let me tell my side of the story?'

'No. I've heard enough about it. The only thing that might excuse it is if your husband was abusive, but he wasn't, was he? In fact, I hear he's a decent guy who's raised your daughter without you.'

I can't argue with this; everything Jamie's said is true. 'Who told you?' I ask.

He ignores me and stands up 'It's over, not that anything ever got started. Let's just go our separate ways now. Don't call me. Ever. In fact, delete my number from your phone.'

Before I can say anything else, Jamie walks away, and I'm left watching him as he disappears into the crowd of people floating around Leicester

Square.

I have never been a drinker, not even on social occasions, but Jamie finding out about me has left me desolate, and I find myself sitting alone in a bar in Covent Garden, already on my third wine. I'm aware of people watching me. I'm not dressed to be meeting anyone for a business lunch, or even a date, so it's obvious what I'm doing. I may as well have a sign plastered across my head.

Focus on Kayla, I keep telling myself. *You've got to find a way to get her back, even if it's not with Aiden's blessing.* But the truth is, even though I couldn't see it, Jamie mattered too. And now there's also the unanswered question of who told him, and what it means for me.

Even though I know it's wrong, I pick up my phone and text Jamie, telling him that I will leave him alone but begging him to tell me who told him about me.

He probably won't reply but I have to try. Surprisingly, though, after twenty minutes and another drink, a reply comes.

Leave me alone, Eve.

There has to be a way to find out, yet nothing comes to me, and this only deepens my anxiety.

The irony is that I was ready to tell Jamie about Kayla – and maybe there would have been a chance he might have understood if he'd heard it from me – yet it was taken out of my hands. This is not the first time fate has opened the ground beneath me, leaving me to free fall into whatever abyss lies beneath.

'What a loser,' I think I hear someone at another table say, but I don't look up for confirmation that they're talking about me.

They couldn't be more wrong about me.

It's dark when I step off the Tube at Southgate, teetering for just a moment because I'm unaccustomed to so much alcohol surging through me, almost paralysing me.

Yet, somehow, I make it to my road, relieved to reach my cobalt blue front door. I don't know who decided to paint it that colour, or when they did, but it's the only house on the street with such a brightly coloured door. I laugh to myself, even though nothing at all is funny.

I don't know what makes me stop at my car, leaning against it even though it's parked right outside the house and I could be inside within seconds. Something feels strange and even though I turn and am staring right at the problem, my brain takes a while to register what I'm looking at.

The driver's side window and the front windscreen have been smashed, as if someone has battered them with a hammer. Shards of glass lie scattered by my feet – which I failed to notice before – the pavement decorated with glistening fragments.

'What the hell?' I say into the still night. There isn't a single person around to hear me.

Glancing at my ground floor neighbour's window, everything is dark and there's no sign that she's home. But the lights are on in the house next door, so I rush up the steps to the front door, pounding on it until a woman in her mid-fifties answers. Although I've seen her before, we've never spoken, barely even acknowledged each other.

'Can I help you?'

'I'm... I live next door—'

'I know that. But why are you trying to break my door down?'

'Sorry. I...' I turn to the road and point. 'That's my car there. Did you see anyone outside this evening?'

She peers into the night. 'Oh. Someone's done a job on it, haven't they? You must have really upset someone.' She shakes her head. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to make light of it.'

'Did you see anything?'

'Nope. I've been in the back room all evening and didn't hear anything either. Have you called the police?'

It hadn't even crossed my mind. It's not as if they would have a chance of finding out who did this, and there's no CCTV around here. I look up at the other houses but no one else seems to be home.

‘Thanks for your time,’ I manage to say, carefully negotiating the steps back down because a trip to A&E is the last thing I need right now.

Back in my flat, I double lock the door. I’ve never been a paranoid person, but the chances of my car being targeted at random are slim.

Even though I live in London and crime isn’t uncommon, there was no reason for this attack – my car is a five-year-old Peugeot, with nothing of value inside.

My hands are clammy with sweat, and I rush to the kitchen for some water, the glass slipping from my hand before I’ve had a sip. Crouching down, I clean up the glass, trying to shut out all thoughts and focus only on the task at hand. It’s almost a relief to have these tiny shards to turn my attention to, and I spend longer than necessary clearing up the mess in order to still my mind.

I can’t escape this though, and my mind races. This was deliberate. An escalation after ignoring those messages, and my conviction that someone was in my flat.

It is happening. It is all finally catching up with me.

TWENTY-NINE

Before

‘What the hell are you doing? That’s your baby!’

The young girl grabs me and spins me around, her grasp surprisingly strong for someone so thin. ‘I just saw you with it and now you’ve left it in the park!’

I snap to my senses and shrug her off, still feeling the hard pressure of her grip even though she’s no longer got hold of me. ‘My baby is a *she*. And no, of course I wasn’t leaving her. I just thought I’d lost something on the path. I was having a quick look for it without disturbing her. She’ll wake up if I start pushing her pram.’

The girl turns to her friend. I’m lucky enough that they’re both probably too young to realise that babies often need motion to keep them asleep. ‘She’s lying, Nisha. She was dumping her baby.’

Thankfully, her friend is sceptical. ‘I dunno, Ella, she looks all right to me.’

Keep believing that. Assure your friend that nobody in their right mind would leave a baby in the middle of the morning, in a park which lies next to a busy road.

Without another word, I head back to Kayla, leaving the two of them to debate this situation by themselves. As I walk away, I hear Ella attempt to convince Nisha that they should call the police.

A short walk has never seemed so long, and Kayla is shrieking when I reach her. Luckily the constant hum of traffic has stopped the two girls noticing she’s never actually been asleep. ‘Let’s go home,’ I whisper, as if nothing has happened, as though this is just an ordinary morning.

The problem is that the two girls are standing right by the park exit, leaving me no way to avoid them. I’ve become adept at subterfuge, though, and I stroll towards them, my head held high because they need to think I’ve got nothing to hide. I’m just an ordinary mum.

‘Hey, wait!’ the one called Ella shouts. ‘We’re calling the police – you can’t just *go*.’

Keep calm; you can do this. ‘Honestly, this is all a big misunderstanding. Why would I leave my baby in this park? That’s just ridiculous. I only live a couple of minutes away.’ My legs are weakening by the second – I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up.

Nisha grabs her friend’s arm. ‘Come on, let’s just go. This is nothing to do with us.’

‘But it’s a *baby*! What if she’s crazy or something, and then we hear about it on the news tonight?’

Silence consumes us all as we’re each left to create our own versions of this scenario in our minds. Something changes in Nisha’s expression; I can almost see the doubts cross her face, like clouds overlapping the sun. ‘Yeah, maybe you’re right, we should call—’

‘Look,’ I interject, desperate to get control of this situation. ‘How about this? I’ll call my mother right now, and she can be here in less than half an hour. She’ll assure you that everything’s okay.’

The girls glance at each other. ‘What about the baby’s dad, then? Where’s he?’

‘My husband’s at work.’ *Leave him out of it; there is no way Aiden can hear about this.* ‘He’s in really important meetings all morning, so there’s no chance of me getting hold of him. Please, I’ll call my mum right now then we can all get on with our days.’

Seconds tick by feeling like minutes. Then finally Ella acquiesces. ‘Go on then, call your mum. But she better be here in half an hour or we’re definitely calling the police.’

I turn to walk away, wondering how I’ve managed to get away with this, knowing that I don’t deserve to.

‘Hang on a minute.’

I spin around, and Ella is pointing her phone at me, snapping my picture before I can register what’s going on.

‘It’s evidence,’ she declares. ‘In case you don’t come back.’

And as I walk away, terrified, I know that this is what I deserve.

At Mum’s house, we transfer Kayla into the spare Moses basket. She fell asleep in the car on the way here, and Mum managed to carry her in without disturbing her.

While Mum makes us both a sandwich, I sink into the sofa and prepare to tell her my story. Or *a* story at least.

‘What on earth is going on?’ Mum asks. Her tone isn’t unkind; I think she’s more annoyed with those two girls interfering in our family business. ‘Why would they think you were leaving Kayla in the park?’

I’m at a crossroads here – with choices to make that could either change my life for the better, or for the worse. I could be honest with Mum, tell her how much I’ve been struggling since Kayla was born, and ask for her help. She would offer it, of course she would, and there would be no judgement. Then she would swiftly take control of the situation, and I wouldn’t have to tell her the whole truth, only that I’m struggling with the baby blues or something like it. Mum is a rock and if I asked her to keep it to herself, she would help without dragging Aiden into my mess.

I put down my uneaten sandwich. ‘Oh, Mum, I—’

Her phone rings, a deafening tone blaring into the room. ‘Sorry,’ she says, ‘I’d better quickly take this.’

I watch her as she speaks, at first concentrating more on her facial expressions as she talks than what she’s saying. Until I realise something is wrong.

‘Oh dear. I can’t believe this. I don’t know how this could have happened,’ she’s saying, grabbing her diary from the coffee table. ‘I never forget an appointment. Please apologise for me, won’t you?’ She frantically flicks through the pages. ‘I can’t understand why it’s not written here.’

Although I’ve got the gist of it, Mum explains what’s happened as soon as she’s finished on the phone. ‘Can you believe I had a lesson booked in and completely forgot about it? I can’t believe this. And the poor girl has her piano exam next week.’

‘Oh, no. But don’t worry, maybe you wrote it somewhere else and forgot to copy it in there?’

Mum stares at me, a frown etched on her forehead. ‘That’s the strange thing, Eve. I *did* write it in my diary. Look, it’s right here.’ She jabs her finger at today’s page. ‘See. And the terrible thing is, I checked this page first thing in the morning, just like I always do.’

And while I’m in the midst of assuring Mum that these things happen, I know with certainty that I can never burden her with the truth about me. Any of it.

THIRTY

Now

It takes me all morning to sort out getting my car window fixed. I could dip into my sparse savings to stop my insurance skyrocketing next year, but I need to keep as much as possible saved. Things are coming to a head, and I can't shake the feeling that I might need this money soon.

On my phone, I check my inbox and read the first email again. *I know you lied.*

And then I click *reply* and begin typing, my hands shaking.

I know it was you who damaged my car. Just so you know, I'm not scared of you.

Even as I press *send*, doubts creep through my head. Perhaps I have got this wrong. And what then? All I can know for sure is that someone deliberately targeted me, but I have no firm evidence of anything. Or anyone. What if it was Aiden? He doesn't want me back in Kayla's life, so maybe this is a warning sign to keep away. Even though an act like this is completely at odds with his character, I long ago realised you never know what people are capable of.

Without a plan for what I will say, I call Nicole's mobile. She's asked me to give them some space but there's something I need to know.

'Eve?' Her voice is a whisper, and I hear her shutting a door. 'Are you okay? Is something wrong?'

'I'm sorry I'm calling after you asked for space, but I need to ask you something.'

'Okay. Of course. Aiden's in the shower so I'll have to be quick, otherwise he'll know I'm talking to you.'

I explain what happened to my car and hope that she realises what I want to ask before I have to say it. She doesn't, though, instead asking if I need some help to get it fixed.

'No, thank you but that's not why I'm calling. I just... look, I'm sorry to ask this but I need to know if I've been targeted or whether it was random.'

Kids trying to steal it or something.'

Finally realisation dawns. 'Hang on, you think it might have been *Aiden*?'

'No. I don't know. I just don't know what to think.'

'Aiden's actually feeling a lot better now. I told him you'd agreed to leave us alone to decide what to do in our own time, and it was like a lead weight was lifted from him. I swear, I could actually see his shoulders loosen. Sorry, I know that's not what you want to hear right now, but it just wouldn't make sense that he'd smash your car up.'

Nicole has a point. Then who?

'Also,' she continues, 'I can put your mind at rest. He worked from home yesterday and we were together the whole day. Night too.'

'Okay.' This narrows things down. 'I had to check, though, I hope you understand that?'

'I know. Things are difficult right now but that doesn't mean it will always be this way. Thank you again, Eve, for giving us this time. Actually, while we're on the phone, I just wanted to let you know that we might be taking Kayla to visit Aiden's parents in Edinburgh on Sunday. It's just for a few days.'

We end the call, and I throw my phone onto the couch, letting out a frustrated growl. There is no way I'm letting Kayla go again.

I haven't contacted Sophie since I turned up at her house last week, yet here I am again with so many things I need to say to her. She may once have been my closest friend, but I can't ignore my gut instinct. The feeling that she's hiding something runs through my blood, and I can't shake it.

Damien opens the door, the twins hovering behind him, and he seems surprised to see me standing on his doorstep once again. 'Eve. Um, Sophie's not here. She went to her mum's this morning and isn't back yet.'

I don't let this deter me. 'Would you mind if I came in and waited for her?' It's not fair of me to put him on the spot like this but I'm running out of options.

'I don't know if—'

'I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important,' I assure him.

‘Okay. I suppose.’ He stands aside to let me past, and once I’m inside I relax a little. The twins are here. It will be okay. And now I’m inside, he won’t get me out easily.

‘Do you have a day off today?’ I ask, remembering that Damien is a project manager for a large chain of department stores. John Lewis, I think it was. At least that’s what he used to do.

‘Nope,’ Damien says. ‘Working from home. Supposed to be at least.’

‘Please don’t let me stop you. I’ll just sit down and wait; you really don’t have to keep me entertained.’ I flash him a smile, try my best to appear confident when my stomach is performing somersaults. Even though I spent a lot of time with Sophie those years ago, Damien was usually at work, so I haven’t been around him much.

He considers my words, but just when I think he’ll agree, he shakes his head. ‘No, it’s fine. I was due a break anyway. I’ll sit with you.’ He glances at his watch, and I know he’s hoping Sophie will be back soon.

At least five long minutes pass while we sit in awkward silence, with me scrolling aimlessly through my phone just so that neither of us feels obliged to talk. The twins have drifted off to the kitchen, quietly watching something on an iPad, so it’s a surprise when Damien speaks.

‘I have to say, it took a lot of guts for you to come back.’

I stare at him, wondering if he’s being genuine or whether he’s leading up to something I won’t like. ‘You’re the only person who’s said that.’

He nods. ‘I can imagine. We humans aren’t always good at compassion, are we? We like to think we are, but when it really comes to it we’re too quick to judge others.’

Damien is right; other than from Nicole, all I’ve faced since I came back is anger and judgement. ‘Thanks for saying that.’

He stares at me and smiles, and just for a moment I feel as though he can see right through me, as though he knows everything. It’s impossible, yet there is something about the way he’s watching me. My alert level rises.

‘I have to say, though, I was as shocked as everyone else when you left. From everything Sophie used to tell me it seemed that you and Aiden were as close as it’s possible for two people to be.’

‘We were. It wasn’t about him.’

‘I’m guessing Sophie told you about the aftermath? How much Aiden needed our support?’

‘Yes, a bit. It couldn’t have been easy for any of you. I can only apologise for that.’

‘Oh, please, no need. It was mostly Sophie who was there for him. I was working such long hours back then – you might remember – so I wasn’t here to help much.’

Damien is going somewhere with this, leading the conversation, trying to broach something. I could ask him outright so that he doesn’t have to take this long road and waste his and my time, but I need to hear everything he has to say.

‘I regret it,’ Damien says.

‘What?’

‘Not being around more to help Sophie. She had the twins, work, and Aiden and Kayla round here most of the time.’

This is a surprise to me; as long as I’d known him Aiden had never wanted to be a burden to anyone. He was fiercely private too, and it would have been hard for him to ask for help. I mention this to Damien.

‘You’re right,’ he says. ‘It wasn’t Aiden inflicting himself on us, no, he’d never have done that. It was Sophie who was always taking the twins round to him. Or getting our parents to babysit so she could go and cook for him or sort the house out. Whatever he needed.’

Sophie never mentioned this. ‘That’s Sophie, isn’t it?’ I say. ‘She’ll do anything for anyone.’

Damien looks at me for a second before answering. ‘Yes, that’s Sophie all over.’ He should be smiling as he says this, yet he isn’t.

‘What is it, Damien? What are you trying to say?’

He seems stunned by my question, and I wonder if I’ve got it wrong, that my inability to trust anyone is making me paranoid.

‘Things had settled down before you came back. Everything was how it should be, and now... he was round here the other night when he should have been at home with his family.’

‘Who? What are you talking about?’

‘Aiden, of course. After you left, they were always together and... I’m not the jealous type, but even I started questioning everything. It happens, doesn’t it? People who spend a lot of time together become closer and then...’

Sophie and Aiden? It’s not possible.

‘Damien, are you saying you think the two of them had an affair or something?’

‘I don’t know. It’s possible, though, isn’t it? She was always putting him and Kayla first, maybe even before the twins.’

‘That’s because Kayla was a newborn baby.’ I say this but do I really believe it? If Sophie had developed feelings for Aiden then it would explain how cold she’s been towards me.

‘I just felt something was wrong about it back then. It was only when Aiden met Nicole that the two of them seemed to back off from each other. But now you coming back has come between the two of them, and he’s back here needing Sophie again.’

I tell Damien that he’s reading too much into this.

‘I hope I am,’ he says. ‘But I know this much at least: your little girl became like a daughter to Sophie. As important to her as the twins. There’s nothing she wouldn’t do for her, and maybe that’s why they—’ His phone pings, and he fishes it from his pocket to check. ‘That’s Soph. She says she’s going to stay for dinner at her mum’s. Sorry, Eve.’

‘It’s okay. What were you about to say, though?’

He looks at me, and I see from his expression that something has shifted. ‘Nothing. Shall I tell her to call you?’

‘Tell me what you were about to say. I know it was something.’

He stares at me, then shakes his head. ‘Just drop it, will you?’

One of the twins shouts to him, something about the iPad not working, and Damien abruptly stands. I’m not going to get any more out of him.

‘Please tell Sophie to call me. It’s urgent.’

He looks at me as if I’m asking him for the world.

‘I’ll sort all this out, Damien, I promise you that. Whatever it is.’

He nods, and I stand up and tell him there’s no need to see me to the door. The walls are closing in on me, and I need to get out of here.

Outside, with the fresh air enveloping me, I try to focus my thoughts. Every word Damien said just now spins around my head.

It’s now more important than ever that I speak to Sophie.

THIRTY-ONE

Now

Sophie doesn't call that night, and the next morning there is nothing but silence from my phone. Right now it feels like I'm in a maze, with everyone knowing the right direction to the exit except me. I'm missing something huge here, but I have no idea what it is.

When she still hasn't called by eleven a.m., I grab my phone and call her instead, fully prepared to leave a voicemail.

'Hello?'

'Sophie, it's Eve.'

'I know.' Yet she answered the phone as though she didn't know who was calling.

'Did Damien mention that I stopped by yesterday?'

'Stopped by? That makes it sound so casual, as though you were just popping in for a coffee. That's not what you were doing though, is it?'

I ignore her jibe. 'We need to talk, Sophie.'

'I helped you, didn't I? I don't know what more there is to talk about. I know we were close once, but things have changed, haven't they? Surely you can see that?'

Yes, I can. If only she knew what else I can see so clearly now. 'I don't want to fight with you, Sophie, I just need to talk. And then if you never want to see me again, I'll respect your decision.' I can't let her know that I might be the one who ends up making this choice.

Her answer is to remain silent, but I'll wait as long as I have to.

'Fine,' she says. 'Tonight.'

'Let's meet for dinner,' I suggest.

'I'm not sure about—'

'Come on, Sophie. For old time's sake?'

After a long pause, she agrees. And now it's just a waiting game.

She's twenty minutes late, and I sit alone in Café Rouge, feeling like I've been stood up by a date. I know that's what the staff here must be thinking. It's not important, though; I long ago stopped caring what other people think of me.

I'll give it ten more minutes and if she hasn't shown by then I will track her down. Just as I'm about to check my phone again, Sophie appears.

'Well, this feels weird,' she says, slipping into the chair opposite. 'I can't remember the last time we went for a meal somewhere.'

'Before the twins were born,' I say. 'Pizza at the Italian place that closed down. It was after a parents' evening.'

She frowns. 'How do you remember that? I don't at all.'

'Well, a lot's happened since then.'

'What's this all about?' Sophie asks. 'Why did you need to see me so urgently?'

I haven't planned how I'll approach this; perhaps I thought in my mind that meeting for dinner would rekindle something in our friendship, encourage her to be straight with me, but as Sophie said – everything's changed. 'I'm not going to pretend this conversation is anything other than what it is. I just want honesty from you, Sophie.'

'Well, that's rich coming from you, but I'm not you, am I?'

'Someone smashed my car windows the other day, and I don't think it was random.'

Her eyes widen. Is this a sign she knows nothing about it? 'I'm sorry. That's a shitty thing to happen.'

'It's not just the inconvenience of having to fix the windscreen, it's more a case of why someone would do it. What does it mean? I've been going over it and it can only be some sort of warning. A pathetic one, I have to say. Why can't people just come out and say what their problem is?'

'Look, I'm sorry for what happened, but what's this got to do with me?'

'Probably nothing, but I had to go through all the people in my life at the moment, and it's a short list. Aiden, Jamie and you.'

And the person who has been emailing me.

Sophie shrugs. 'What about your students? Maybe one of them is angry with you because they failed an exam or something? Maybe they think you didn't tutor them properly.'

'No. This is about Kayla, it has to be.'

Before Sophie can respond, the waitress comes over and asks what we'd like to eat. 'A croque monsieur for me, please,' I say, handing my menu back. It takes all my effort to keep my hand from shaking.

'Just a Prosecco for me, please,' Sophie says. 'Nothing to eat.'

'Are you sure?' I ask. 'It's my treat.'

'No appetite I'm afraid.'

The waitress heads off, and I stare at Sophie. In the past she was the one I always turned to whenever I needed to talk, at least until I could no longer talk to anyone. I trusted her with my life, yet now she is no more than a stranger.

'I don't understand what you're trying to say,' Sophie continues as soon as the waitress has gone.

There's no time to ease into this gently. 'Why did you tell me you didn't see much of Aiden and Kayla after I left?'

Looking at Sophie now, her eyes wide with shock, she looks as if she's just been caught stealing. I've never seen her caught off guard before now, and a wave of guilt washes over me. I'm not the one in the wrong this time, I have to keep that in mind.

'Damien told you.'

'The point is, why didn't *you* tell me?'

'It's my business, though, isn't it? You left, so I was there for Aiden. I did tell you that.'

'Not exactly. You made out that you were only in touch occasionally. You didn't mention that you had such a bond with Kayla.'

And with Aiden, although I'll save this information for later.

Sophie sits up straighter. 'Why does that matter? Yes, I helped Aiden a lot with Kayla in the early days, so she means a lot to me.' Her eyes narrow. 'Wait, are you suggesting that I don't want you around Kayla? And that I smashed your car windscreen to warn you off?'

Now that she's said it herself out loud, it doesn't seem to fit. So I can rule her out.

'Maybe it was that boyfriend of yours? He didn't seem happy when I met him the other day. Maybe he doesn't want you being around Aiden.'

Despite everything that's happening between Sophie and me right now, I find myself telling her that Jamie and I are no longer together.

'So you've left him too? Even more reason for him to be the one who smashed up your car.'

No. There's no way. 'He's... he was a decent guy,' I say. 'And I didn't leave him. It was the other way around.'

For a second, I expect Sophie to throw out a remark about me deserving it, but she doesn't. 'Even good people can be pushed to their limit,' she says.

I ignore this because there is no way it was Jamie. 'The trouble was, I have far too much baggage, even for someone as decent as Jamie to handle.'

'Hmmm. I imagine it's not easy telling people what you did.'

'I've actually never told anyone. Mum's illness meant I never really had to explain it to her properly, and I've kept away from people on a social level. I never went back to the school so...'

The waitress brings Sophie's Prosecco, and she lifts her glass and stares at it before taking a sip. 'How did you end up in a relationship then?'

Jamie flashes into my head. Kind, funny, talented Jamie. Not someone who would deliberately hurt me, surely? 'It was meant to be casual. I never thought he'd develop deeper feelings for me, or I would have stayed away from him.' But would I? It had been a huge shock to me when I'd started talking to him and actually began to feel something physically. For so long I hadn't wanted anyone to be anywhere near me, then inexplicably I couldn't stop wanting Jamie. Until he'd fall asleep – then I needed him as far away from me as possible. I don't tell Sophie any of this.

'Is it really over between you two? It doesn't seem like you're over him.'

'It's more a case of him being over me.' I would have Jamie back in an instant and give him the relationship he deserves this time. Again, I say none of this aloud.

'Well, I hope you leave him alone then,' Sophie says, and with her words she is right back to being a woman I can't trust. 'Speaking of which, I hope you're leaving Aiden and Nicole alone too now? Oh, don't look so surprised. Aiden and I do actually talk, Eve. There's no law against that.'

When I don't reply, Sophie begins her attack. 'Don't you think you've been selfish enough? They're a *family*, Eve. The three of them. Then suddenly you come along and shatter their lives, and it's like Aiden's right back to how he was when you left him.'

'I... that's not—'

'I can't listen to this any more, Eve. I feel like I'm betraying all of them just being here with you.' She stands up and hoists her bag onto her

shoulder. 'You're never going to have Kayla back in your life. Just stay away from all of us.'

And then she's gone, a waft of her perfume lingering behind to mock me.

THIRTY-TWO

Before

Sometimes it feels as though I'm being watched. The rational part of my brain – yes, it's still there somewhere – tells me this is ridiculous, yet I often feel a presence with me when I'm alone with Kayla, a constant reminder of something I want to forget.

For days now I've expected Mum to mention the incident in the park to Aiden, but she hasn't. She hasn't even spoken of it to me; it's as if her memory has completely erased any record of it. She was more distressed about forgetting her student's piano lesson that day.

I should be thankful for this, but of course I'm not. It means that Mum is worse than I suspected. I've let my own troubles push her issue to the side, but I can no longer ignore it. Something is wrong with her and I need to help her. She won't listen to me, though, and insists she's fine, that she doesn't need to see the doctor. So for now all I can do is monitor her closely.

'How come I'm getting daily calls?' she'll ask.

'I'm a new mum,' I explain. 'I just need to hear an adult voice.'

She laughs, and then I do too, even though I'm crumbling inside. This is how our phone calls go more often than not.

Sophie is coming round with the twins today. Both of us being parents should have made us closer than ever, yet I couldn't be further away from her. Talking to her is like being with a virtual stranger, someone I might have just met at a baby group.

It's a ripple effect. One thing happening that disperses and eviscerates everything else in your life. Sinister and silent.

Kayla is sleeping well today; she's settled in her Moses basket and I'm sitting on the floor beside her, knowing I should make the most of this rare moment to myself, yet unable to summon the energy to move. Even when I'm having an easier time of it, there is no difference. I still can't feel a thing when I look at her peaceful tiny face.

'It's not your fault,' I whisper. 'You didn't ask to be here. None of this is your fault.' I say this over and over, hoping the repetition will seep into my

brain and manifest love. But there's nothing but disconnection from the tiny being I brought into the world.

'Oh, you look awful!' Sophie says, bounding into the house with the twins clutching her hands. 'Are you sick?'

Sophie has just given me the perfect excuse. 'Yes, I am. I'm sorry, I should have told you not to come. I don't want to pass anything on to any of you.'

'Don't worry about us. The twins seem to have superhero immunity, and I can't remember the last time I had even a cold.' She hesitates and frowns. 'Unless you're not up to company? The twins can be rowdy devils, so I'll totally understand if you'd rather we go.'

I look at Sophie and I'm torn. Company of any sort is the last thing I want, but she's made the effort to come and see me. How can I turn her away now? The me before – that's how I've become accustomed to thinking of myself now: two different versions of Eve, *before* and *after* – would never entertain the idea of telling her to leave, even if I was genuinely ill. But I'm not that person. I will never again be that person. I'm the *after* Eve and I can't bear to be around Sophie, or anyone else, now.

'I'm so sorry,' I say, 'but I might just need to sleep while Kayla's napping.'

Sophie hugs me. 'No need to apologise. We'll catch up when you're feeling better. Come on, boys, we have to go home now.'

At least the twins are too young to understand why they've been here for less than two minutes.

From the upstairs window, I watch while Sophie bundles them into the car. I'm a terrible friend, a terrible mother, and no kind of wife to Aiden at the moment.

Lying down on the bed, I let myself believe I'm alone, that the house is silent because Aiden and I are yet to start a family. I'm not sure if I manage to sleep, but when Kayla's shriek penetrates my ears, I feel as though I haven't had a second of peace.

Later, when I'm carrying her downstairs after changing her nappy, I imagine myself tumbling down the stairs, crashing to the bottom. Would I be okay? Would Kayla survive such an awful fall?

And every time after this, it's impossible to carry her downstairs without this thought in my head.

THIRTY-THREE

Now

Walking home from the Tube, it strikes me how alone I am. Although the past couple of years have made me immune to this, it is different now. This is about Kayla, not me. And now I have no choice but to take things further.

Someone is right behind me, almost too close. I'm about to turn around, but then I feel the arm around my neck, the whispered breath in my ear. 'Don't bother screaming. We need to have a little chat. That's your place over there, keep walking and I'll be right behind you.' The arm eases off me, and I quickly assess my options. Running is not one of them. He'd catch up with me before I've even gone a metre. Nor will shouting for help do any good – there's nobody around, and hardly any lights on in any windows. My mobile phone is buried somewhere in my bag, and there's no way he'll give me a chance to grab it.

Stay calm. Don't panic. You can deal with this. He knows where I live, so clearly this is someone who knows me; I'm not being targeted at random.

But I don't recognise his voice.

My body becomes numb and I'm walking on autopilot. There will be a way out of this; there has to be.

We reach my door, and he's standing right behind me, too close, but not close enough that anyone passing by or watching from their window would suspect anything. Perhaps it only looks like I'm inviting him in, that I might be spending the night with him. I shudder at this thought.

'Get in,' he says. 'Quick.' He pushes me forward.

My hand shakes as I pull my keys from my pocket, despite my determination to get through this unharmed. I don't know what makes me do it, but before I turn the key I spin around and face him.

He's young, no more than nineteen or twenty, and as I stare at his face I realise that I've seen him before. I know exactly who he is.

'Does Maya know you're here, Connor?'

His eyes widen, and he steps back. He hasn't expected me to address him by his name. For now, at least, I have taken some control from him. I have to just hang on to that, and then I can get through this.

‘How do you...? Ah, who cares, just let me in.’

‘You didn’t answer me. Does Maya know you’re here?’

‘We’ll get to that in a minute, now just shut this bloody door.’ He slams it behind us and shoves me forward. It’s not a violent shove, and I won’t let it unnerve me.

‘What are you doing here, Connor?’ I ask once we’re inside, standing in my living room like two characters in a film who aren’t sure where they should be.

‘You’re an evil bitch,’ he says, taking a step towards me.

I flinch but quickly recover. Maya has told him about my lie, then. But it’s none of his business; it doesn’t make sense that he’s here. ‘It’s got nothing to do with you.’

He leans into my face, hatred seeping from his pores. ‘Nothing to do with me? You killed my baby and you think it’s got nothing to do with me?’

Silence thunders down on me. ‘Your baby? But...’ And then I realise. This is not about Kayla at all; this is about Maya’s baby. *Their* baby.

Still, I need clarification. ‘What exactly are you talking about?’

‘It’s because of you that Maya got rid of our baby. It’s all your fault.’ He’s spitting his words now, saliva spraying onto the carpet.

‘Okay, just calm down a minute. Please, sit down and we can talk about this. I haven’t seen Maya this week. She hasn’t even texted me.’

Connor doesn’t sit down; he stays too close to me, his eyes still wild with rage. I take a step back, try to hold my nerve.

‘She told me all about your little chats during your tutoring sessions,’ he hisses. ‘I know you gave her advice about the pregnancy. Told her to get rid of it.’ He raises his voice. ‘Some shit about thinking about her future.’

I need to try and calm him down. ‘Connor, listen, you’ve got it wrong. All I did was let her talk, and then I told her to speak to her parents.’

‘And that did a bloody lot of good, didn’t it!’ He’s yelling now, and strides to the window and back, his hands clenched by his sides. ‘I never thought for one second they’d want her to get rid of it. I thought if they knew—’

‘So it was you who told them? Maya blamed me to start with.’

He ignores me. ‘This is a sick world when grandparents won’t even fight for their unborn grandchild.’ He’s shaking now, either from rage or sadness, or more likely both.

‘Connor, please sit down. I can see why you’re so upset. It must feel as though you had no choice in any of this, that it was all taken out of your hands.’ *We are the same. If only he knew.*

He stares at me, and it’s hard to tell how he’ll respond. For a moment I envisage him smashing his fist into my face, taking out his anger on the only person he can. ‘And what the hell would you know about that?’ he snarls.

I sit down myself, hoping he will mirror my action. ‘Everything actually. More than I can ever say.’

His eyes narrow, and just for a second something replaces the anger. Curiosity, perhaps.

‘I’m not sitting down in this bloody place,’ he says, looking around. ‘This is where you encouraged my girlfriend to get rid of our baby.’ He spits on the floor, and I pretend I haven’t noticed.

‘You love Maya, am I right?’

‘Yeah, I did. So?’

‘And you probably know her better than anyone?’

He flicks his head, which I take as a sign of agreement.

‘Then you will know that Maya is an extremely intelligent, savvy young woman with a mind of her own. She’s so headstrong, even if I’d wanted to talk her into anything, there was no way I could have. You must know that, Connor.’

He thinks about this for a moment, and I dare to hope that finally I’m getting through to him. ‘But she was undecided. Then suddenly she knew there was no way she could have it. How can you explain that sudden change? Eh?’

It’s hard not to wonder if my story about Kayla had anything to do with Maya’s decision. A wave of guilt washes over me. But everything I’ve said to Connor is true; Maya made her own decision, and I never tried to steer her in any direction. *Yet things can happen inadvertently. You know that better than most.*

‘Look, Connor, you may not believe me but I’m here, looking you right in the eye and promising you that I did not encourage Maya to have a termination. I was her tutor and would never have offered any kind of advice in that way. All I told her to do was speak to her family. And talk to you about how conflicted she felt. That’s it. If that somehow unwittingly led

to her final decision then I'm sorry, I truly am, but I really don't believe that's what happened.'

Finally, he sits on the sofa and buries his head in his hands. 'That was my baby in her stomach. Gone. Just like that.'

'I know, and it's heartbreaking – I totally understand that. But, listen – how old are you?'

He looks up, frowning. 'Twenty-three next month. Why?'

'You're still so young. You've got a whole lifetime ahead of you. Loads of time to have children.'

'What the hell? Is that supposed to make me feel better?'

'No, nothing can right now. But in time the pain will ease, and you'll find a way to live with it. Believe me, I really do know what I'm talking about.'

He doesn't answer but at least the anger has dissipated. Now I will just leave him alone for a moment to process everything I've said.

'I came here to hurt you,' he says, eventually. 'To hurt you like I've been hurt. But now that I'm here I know I don't even need to do that. You've got enough enemies, haven't you? They can do the job for me.'

I freeze. 'What are you talking about?'

He ignores me and stands. 'I hope one day you know what it feels like to lose your kid,' he spits, marching out of the room without looking back.

As soon as the front door slams, I rush to the window and fling it open. 'Connor! Wait! It was you who smashed my car windows, wasn't it?'

He glances up, and it's hard to tell but it seems as though he might be smirking.

THIRTY-FOUR

Now

‘Did you bring my little girl?’ Mum asks as soon as I step into her room. Her face crumples when she sees I’m alone. ‘Oh, I do look forward to seeing her.’

‘Not today, Mum. I promise I’ll try to bring her next time.’ I won’t make a promise to her that I cannot keep.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Mum asks. ‘Why are you so... funny?’

‘Funny?’

‘You know. Not right. I don’t know. You’re just not right, not right at all!’

‘Okay, Mum, please just calm down. I’m fine. Everything’s okay.’

There is some truth in this. It’s been days since Connor forced his way into my flat, yet I’m not afraid. Instead, his actions have spurred me on to take action of my own. And now there is a strange calmness flowing through me.

‘Tell me what you’ve been doing today,’ I say to Mum.

‘I tried to go to the bus stop across the road. But the door was locked. Again! Can you believe that? I won’t be staying in this place again, that’s for sure.’ She looks around at her clean, tidy room. ‘And look at it, it’s a mess. What kind of hotel is this? They don’t even have room service. I think I want my money back!’

‘Okay, Mum, let’s see what we can do. But how about we have a coffee first?’

I spend the next couple of hours focusing all my attention on Mum. I wish I could tell her that everything’s going to be okay, that soon enough she will be able to spend much more time with Kayla.

I feel guilty that I can’t stay longer today, but there’s something I have to do, and it can’t wait any longer.

It's nearly five p.m. when I get home. Today has been a day of moving forward, making things happen, and I'm exhausted so, as soon as I'm inside, I check each room in my flat and then get ready for bed.

My buzzer goes just as I'm rummaging through the cupboards to find something to eat, and I rush to the door, hoping that it's Jamie. There can't be anyone else who would come here, and if it was Connor again then I'm sure he wouldn't be ringing the buzzer.

Aiden's is the last voice I'm expecting to hear. 'Eve? I know it's late but can we talk?'

Confused, I let him in and quickly change into jeans and a T-shirt before I open the door. 'What's happened? Is Kayla okay?'

'She's fine. I think we need to talk, though.'

He comes inside and makes his way to the living room. 'This isn't the kind of place I'd expect you to live,' he says, taking in his surroundings.

'I didn't have much choice. Besides, it's fine for just me.'

'Kayla could never stay here,' he says, more to himself than to me.

'Is that what you've come here to say? Bit of a waste of your time, isn't it? You and Nicole wanted me to stay away, which I've done, so why are you here now?'

'Can I sit?' he asks.

'Does Nicole know you're here?'

He shakes his head. 'No. Not yet. I came straight from work. Anyway, she's gone to her mum's for a couple of days. She's still not feeling well and needed to rest. Kayla's with Amy, the childminder.'

He walks to the window and stares at the street outside, saying nothing.

'What are you doing here, Aiden?'

Slowly he turns to face me. 'I'm not sure. I've just spent so much time hating you that I think I've... lost sight of things.'

'What things?'

'Well, what's best for Kayla I suppose. All this time I've felt that keeping you away from her is for the best but, well, now I'm not so sure.' He stares at the floor now, clearly finding this all difficult to admit.

My heart begins to race. 'Are you saying that I can see Kayla?'

'Yes. No. I don't know.' He crosses to the sofa and sinks into it. 'Nicole keeps telling me not to keep Kayla away from you. Maybe it's finally sinking in.' He looks up at me. 'Can you just sit down or something? You're making me uncomfortable hovering over me like that.'

I do as he asks, even though I don't want to sit. I'm too sick with anxiety about how this will all pan out.

'I know you took Kayla to see your mum,' he says. 'Oh, don't look so surprised – Kayla talks nonstop, there's no way she wouldn't mention it.'

So this is the real reason Aiden is here. 'I... I had to. It was my day to see Mum and I couldn't miss it, but Nicole needed me to babysit.'

'It's okay, Eve. I know all that and I'm not angry. Nicole explained it to me. The way Kayla was talking about Jackie, it just really hit me. It's not just you she's missed out on, it's your mum too.'

Even though I'm hearing these words, I can't quite believe them. Is it possible that Mum has unwittingly forced Aiden to be reasonable? 'I'm glad you see things this way now.'

He nods. 'I wasn't always there for you, though, was I? When we were together.'

Even though I don't know where his question has come from, I assure him this isn't true, that I never felt that way.

'Look what happened with Jackie. I remember that you often worried about her, and I'd dismiss it, tell you it was nothing, that we all forget things sometimes. I'm... well, I'm sorry I didn't listen. I was thinking about this earlier and imagining if it was my mum.'

'It would have made little difference even if she'd seen a doctor sooner.'

Aiden shakes his head. 'I shouldn't have just brushed it off, though. Once I even told you that maybe the stress of not being able to have a baby was getting to you.'

He needs to be convinced that this wasn't his fault. After all, it had been easy to tell myself that Aiden was right. Mum was fine. Of course she was. Because if she wasn't then what did that say about my world? She was my anchor, and I hoped I was hers. Ultimately, I was the one who didn't push hard enough for her to see the doctor.

'I suppose, looking back, it's clear there was something going on,' Aiden continues. 'I would have helped you both. I hope you know that.' Then he is shaking his head again before burying it in his hands. 'What did I do wrong, Eve?'

Still shocked at the turn our conversation has taken, I head over to him and kneel before him. 'Nothing at all. It was all me, none of this had anything to do with you.'

He doesn't seem to hear me. 'I thought I was an okay husband. Nobody's perfect, I know that, but I always tried to do what was right for you, and Kayla once she came along.'

Came along. It's a terrible and inaccurate term, making the whole process of bringing life into this world seem effortless, when for so many people that's not the case. In the end, though, I suppose Kayla did just *come along*.

Once again, I have to fight the pain in my body. *What's done can't be undone.*

'You did everything you could,' I say. Even though something has changed with Aiden, and he is offering me hope, I need to get him out of here. 'Shall we talk on the phone to arrange some visitation?' I say.

'Yeah, let's do that.' He takes my cue and stands up. A frown appears on his face. 'I have to say, you don't look happy. I thought you'd be overjoyed.'

'Of course I am, this is what I've wanted. Thank you, Aiden.'

But sometimes things come far too late.

It's an hour later when the phone call comes – Aiden shouting down the line, his words so indecipherable that I have to ask him to slow down and tell me again what's happened.

'It's Kayla! Someone's taken her! She's gone!'

PART TWO

THIRTY-FIVE

Now

Nearly three months have passed since Kayla was taken. We don't speak of her as *missing*; that doesn't accurately describe what she is. All the evidence points to Nicole having taken her, especially as no one has seen her since.

At first questions were raised: how is it possible that a child can be taken from her childminder so easily in broad daylight? I feel sorry for Amy – a young woman who'd only just set up her own business – because I know she blames herself. It wasn't her fault, though. Kayla saw someone she knew and ran to her. We know it was a woman, and that she had on a denim jacket like the one Nicole had been wearing all summer – and by the time Amy knew what was going on it was too late. They were gone.

Aiden and I are convinced it was Nicole, even though the police can't track her down. How can people just disappear from the face of the earth? Especially in a world with such advanced technology. Yet that seems to be what's happened. At least it gives us hope that Kayla is safe. Neither of us can bring ourselves to believe that Nicole would harm her, although the possibility constantly hangs in the air – a huge question mark, a darkness that has become our constant companion.

The emails haven't stopped, and now there are also silent phone calls, so I know that Kayla's disappearance is unrelated. This at least brings a minuscule amount of relief.

In the beginning I threw questions at Aiden: why would Nicole take her when she was living with you anyway? What was going on in your relationship that she would do this?

It took him a while to open up to me, but then he finally admitted that Nicole had been acting strangely since I showed up. She'd become cold towards him, as if there was something weighing her down. He was too consumed with keeping Kayla from me to pay enough attention to it, though, and now it's too late. I told him that she'd said something similar about him, that time when she came to my flat and confided in me that she and Aiden weren't getting along.

‘There’s something else,’ he told me. ‘Nicole was the one who smashed your car up. I’m so sorry, but I didn’t tell you because I wanted to protect her. I should have known she was on the edge.’ At least that puzzle has been answered.

Even though it’s been so many weeks since Kayla was taken, Aiden is only now beginning to trust me again. Slowly. He barely spoke to me to start with, but then he must have come to realise that I am the only person who shares the same love for Kayla that he does, in spite of my time away from her. It probably helped that he was with me when she was taken, so he’ll know it’s not possible that I was involved. I try not to think about that. Instead, I have gradually started allowing myself to enjoy being close to him again, despite the constant anxiety and sadness of our missing girl.

‘Are you sure you’re okay with Sophie coming over?’ Aiden asks me now. ‘I know things aren’t good between you.’

That’s an understatement. Even in Kayla’s absence, Sophie still can’t bring herself to forgive me for anything. This has just given her more ammunition, and she’s tried to convince Aiden that I am the one who took Kayla.

‘Think about it,’ she’d said to him, ‘you and Nicole had told her to stay away from you all and then suddenly Kayla’s missing. Look what she’s done before. I wouldn’t put anything past her.’

I forgive Sophie for this, though. ‘She’s done so much to try and help find Kayla,’ I tell Aiden now. ‘It’s only right that we both thank her.’

He joins me where I stand, staring through the kitchen doors at the garden Kayla loves to play in, and places his arm across my shoulder. The feel of him is strange: not quite right but not wrong either, a no man’s land.

‘You have every right to be in this house. You’re Kayla’s mother. And it was never really Nicole’s place. She might have chosen furniture and decided where to put things, but I always paid the mortgage by myself. I never asked her for a penny.’

‘Well, she was looking after Kayla, wasn’t she? She couldn’t work.’ Even after what she’s done, I try not to automatically attack Nicole and assume the worst of her. After all, there are always reasons we do what we do, even if others can’t understand them.

The doorbell rings, and my stomach lurches. I stay where I am while Aiden goes to answer, preparing myself to face a firing squad.

Aiden’s voice drifts from the hall. ‘Thanks for coming, Soph.’

Then Sophie's. 'You don't have to thank me. I'm just so sorry this is happening to you.' There's a pause and the sound of rustling, as if they are hugging. 'After everything you've already been through.' Another pause. 'Is she here then?'

She. I'm not someone who deserves to be called by name.

'I hope you know what you're doing, Aiden. I can't say I like it, but I guess I understand.'

'We're just Kayla's parents, sticking together to try to get our girl back. There's no need to read any more into it. Anyway, Eve's in the kitchen, come through.'

Here we go. I put on a smile and wait to face, yet again, the woman who was my closest friend.

It's more of a shock seeing Sophie now, after only three months, than it was after those two years. She's still dressed smartly, with full hair and make-up, yet there's something different about her. I stare at her, trying to work out what it is, but I can't place it. 'Hi, Sophie.' Do I hug her? Shake her hand? In the end I keep my arms by my side and do neither, because she's staying by the door, as far away from me as possible.

'Eve. You look well. I don't know how when it's your daughter who's missing. I mean, look at Aiden, he's a mess – no offence – but then I suppose you're used to not having her around.' No-nonsense Sophie. Straight to the point.

Aiden jumps to my defence. 'Sophie, that's not necessary. Eve's suffering just as much as I am. She's just holding it together better. Don't have a go at her.'

I have to hold it together for your sake, Aiden, because I owe that to you. I won't let you see me fall apart when you need me to be strong.

Sophie holds up her hands. 'Okay, okay, I'm sorry. The past doesn't matter anyway now, does it? We just need to focus on finding Kayla.' She steps forward into the kitchen. 'What's the latest?'

While Aiden fills her in, I put the food together. It's only a buffet lunch, just like Nicole provided that first time I was invited here. It seemed pointless cooking a big meal; neither Aiden nor I have much of an appetite.

'I still keep leaving messages on her voicemail every few days, and on Facebook, but she never responds,' Sophie says while we sit down to force ourselves to eat.

‘No, she’s too clever for that,’ Aiden says. ‘She won’t use her phone or social media because then the police would be able to trace her.’

Sophie nods. ‘Well, the only good thing in all of this is that Nicole loves that little girl. She’d never hurt her.’ She reaches for Aiden’s hand and takes hold of it. I try to ignore the gesture and focus on what she’s just said. She is right, and this is exactly what’s kept me from losing my mind.

‘But she has hurt her, hasn’t she?’ Aiden says. ‘She’s taken her away from me.’ He stares at his plate of food. ‘If Nicole thinks that’s not hurting Kayla, then she’s deluding herself.’

‘I know,’ Sophie agrees. ‘And clearly she’s not in her right state of mind to do something like this, but what do you think tipped her over the edge?’

Aiden’s eyes are on me; I know it even without looking. ‘I don’t know,’ he says, ‘maybe she just... felt threatened.’

Sophie glances at me. ‘By Eve? What do you mean?’

‘If you’re suggesting she thought I was trying to get Aiden back then that’s ridiculous,’ I protest. ‘He hated the sight of me, and Nicole knew that.’

Sophie rolls her eyes. ‘Well, what if she comes back? Changes her mind and realises she’s done something wrong by taking Kayla. This is what she’d come back to.’ She flaps her arms around.

‘There’s nothing going on with us. There wasn’t then and there still isn’t now,’ I insist.

‘But you’re here. And when was the last time you went back to your flat?’ Sophie says.

I ignore her. There are many reasons I don’t want to go back to my flat. In absence of a response, Sophie turns to Aiden. ‘I think you’re making a mistake.’

I try to remain calm. ‘Sophie, I sleep in the spare room. Every night.’

She ignores me. ‘Aiden, I told you this was a bad idea. Maybe you do sleep in different rooms, but only the two of you know that. To the outside world it looks like you’ve shacked up together.’

I stand up. I’m not going to take this abuse from anyone, even Sophie. ‘I’ll be here for as long as Aiden needs me to be. Kayla is our daughter and, like it or not, Sophie, we’re in this together. I walked out on them once, I’m not doing it again. They need me – more than ever.’

Without giving her a chance to respond, I leave the room and rush upstairs to the spare room, closing the door behind me so I can’t hear what

they're saying. I don't want to know what words Sophie uses when she urges Aiden to cut me out of his life. The fact that my friendship with Sophie is over is already cemented in my head; I don't need any more proof.

Later, when we're alone, Aiden tells me that I didn't have to leave. We've just eaten dinner, both of us pushing food around our plates before giving up and leaving it untouched, and now we sit on the sofa with enough space for two people to fit between us.

'I wanted to give you time with Sophie,' I say. 'Besides, I was clearly distracting her and this was meant to be about Kayla. Not that anything does any good. Why haven't we found her yet, Aiden? I feel like I'm not doing anywhere near enough to get her back.' Tears splatter onto the velvet cushion I'm clutching.

Aiden nods. 'I know exactly what you mean. How can we just sit here while she's gone? It's not right, Eve. Nothing about this is right. I feel like for all these months we've been going full speed to find her and now it seems like there's nothing left to do. Like the momentum's been lost. Everything feels like it's just... stopped.'

I move closer to him, placing my hand on his arm. 'This is the worst pain imaginable, isn't it? But we have to keep it together and focus on the one positive thing. Kayla loves Nicole, so even though you're not there, it won't be as bad as it could have been if a stranger had taken her. Nicole will probably be telling her some story about you having to work loads or something, or that they're on a fun holiday. She won't want to see Kayla upset.'

He forces a smile. 'I want to believe that. I just can't say anything for sure any more. You think you know someone, and then...'

'I know.' I pause. There's something I've needed to know and now is the time to ask. 'Aiden, do you blame me for Nicole taking Kayla? If I'd never come back then she wouldn't have done this and you'd all still be together. Happy.'

Aiden is emphatic in his response. 'No, of course I don't because whatever Nicole's reasons, *she* made the choice to take Kayla. That's down

to her alone. She could have talked to me, told me how she was feeling. There were so many different choices she could have made.'

Just like I could have done things differently, too. Only sometimes it's not that easy. 'Thank you. I needed to hear that.'

Aiden studies my face. 'You carry around enough guilt, don't you? Anyway, it's me who needs to thank you. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been here right now. Believe it or not, you're actually getting me through this.' There are tears in his eyes as he speaks, something I'd never seen until Nicole took Kayla.

When he reaches for my hand I let him, and we sit in silence as minutes tick by, taking us further away from Kayla but closer to each other. It feels as though something monumental is about to happen between us; I've slept here more often than not over the last few months but have never sensed anything like this.

Without any words, Aiden pulls me towards him, and I let him, even though I probably shouldn't. Our lives are already complicated enough – surely this won't help. Yet it doesn't feel wrong when he presses his lips to mine and we find each other for the first time since long before Kayla was born.

Afterwards, when Aiden's finally sleeping beside me, I stare at him and wonder how any good will come out of what we've just done.

THIRTY-SIX

Before

‘Are you still attracted to me?’ Aiden asks.

I’m half asleep, my mind frazzled from being up all night with Kayla’s cluster feeding, so perhaps I’ve only imagined that he’s asked me this. Perhaps I should have expected it; I haven’t let him anywhere near me for so long now.

‘Of course I am.’ But am I? I no longer know, and even if I was, it would be impossible to let him anywhere near me. Not since I’ve become this other person; a hollow shell of myself. ‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘I just don’t... you know, before Kayla was born, I was worried something might happen to her if we did anything, and now I’m just so tired all the time.’

He grabs my hand. ‘I know. You’re doing such an amazing job, all day every day on your own. I should try to do more to help. Give you a break.’

‘You’re already doing everything you can. You have to work.’

Aiden leans over me and peers at Kayla, who, miraculously, is fast asleep in her crib. ‘Look at her though. Look at the beautiful being we created.’

My throat dries up and no words come out. I need to agree with him, smile and tell him she’s the most amazing thing that could have happened to us. But nothing comes.

Thankfully, Aiden’s phone rings and I’m relieved to hear it’s his work, calling him in for an emergency meeting.

‘Sorry,’ he says, ‘I thought I’d be able to watch her while you have a shower.’

I muster the biggest smile I can manage. ‘It’s fine, I can pop her in the bouncer so she can see me. She’ll be happy then.’

‘See. Supermum. I told you that you’re amazing.’ Aiden jumps out of bed and throws on a jumper and jeans.

And when he leaves the house, I stand at the window in my pyjamas and watch him drive away, helpless to stop panic and anxiety flood through me.

The rest of the day is okay. I manage. Kayla sleeps a fair amount, and I even doze off myself while she’s napping. The house is fairly clean and

tidy, and, somehow, a kind of peace envelops me. Maybe this will be okay after all. I allow myself to hope, but then it happens.

The text comes right in the middle of this hope, shattering my world to a thousand pieces.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Now

‘I’m sorry,’ Aiden whispers in the morning. ‘Are you okay?’ Even though we were married – still are – in the harsh light of day it now feels awkward, as if last night we were drunken strangers who are now waking up to face the consequences of the night before.

All I can manage is a nod, which seems to help him.

‘I didn’t plan that. It just... felt so natural.’ He stares at the ceiling. ‘Since Kayla’s been gone I didn’t even think I’d ever want to do that again with anyone. But being with you makes me feel close to her. I’m sorry if I —’

‘I knew what I was doing,’ I say. Maybe the way Aiden has explained it is true for me too. If Kayla can’t be here with us then reconnecting with each other might be a way for both of us to feel close to her.

If it didn’t feel so wrong.

I don’t ask Aiden what last night means for us now; I was happy with how things were, with being together yet not *together*. Now everything is messy and blurred. And it is a place I cannot go.

‘Marianne’s coming at ten,’ Aiden reminds me. ‘Are you still okay to be here for that? I just can’t get out of this meeting I’m afraid.’

Before I met Marianne, I envisaged a police liaison officer to be someone whose role was to comfort people with cups of tea. I’ve since learned that she’s so much more than that. For one, she’s a detective, and secondly, nothing gets past her, not even the minutest detail. I have faith in her, and believe she wants Kayla back with us as much as we do. As well as this, I have not once felt any judgement emanating from her, and she knows what I did. *At least as much as anyone can ever know*. I’ve even come to think of her more as a friend than anything else, as strange as that may seem. That’s how she makes me feel.

‘I’ll be here,’ I tell Aiden. ‘I was planning to go home after that, though.’

Aiden’s face falls.

‘I mean just to pick up a few things. Sort my flat out a bit.’

‘Oh, okay. I thought you meant... never mind. I’m glad you’re coming back.’

Of course I’m coming back. Kayla’s my daughter and this is her home. She’ll need me once we’ve found her; Nicole will have scarred her more than I ever did when I walked out. I’m going to be right here to help her through it.

Aiden kisses my forehead then climbs out of bed. While he’s in the shower I pull on his dressing gown and head across the hall to Kayla’s room.

Not long after she was taken, Aiden moved the furniture around in here, determined to erase every trace of Nicole. She had organised where everything went, and I think it helped him to change it all, to somehow make it just his and Kayla’s space. ‘It will be a nice surprise for her when she comes home,’ he’d said.

I sit on the floor by her bed and bury my head in her duvet, wondering what she’s doing at this moment. All I know for sure is that she will be different – a child Kayla’s age will change significantly in three months. I don’t think this has occurred to Aiden, and I never mention it; it will be too devastating for him to hear.

Just as always, I can’t stay in here for too long; that’s like admitting Kayla will never be back here. *She will. Even though it looks hopeless right now, I will not give up on her. I owe it to her to make sure she’s back here with us. Her parents.*

When I hear Aiden turn off the shower, I slip back into the hall. I don’t want him to see my vulnerability; I owe it to him to be strong for all of us.

‘How are you holding up?’ Marianne asks before she’s even through the door.

‘We’re still trying to find a way to live with it,’ I reply, blinking away tears. Why is it that you can soldier on, keeping it all together, then as soon as someone enquires how you are the floodgates open?

She puts her arm around me. ‘I can’t lie and say it gets easier, but you mustn’t give up hope.’ In the few months I’ve known her, it’s clear that Marianne is sharp and intuitive; she must immediately notice that I need a

distraction. 'Why don't you get the kettle on and then we can have a talk about everything?'

Marianne likes her coffee strong. Not black, but with only a tiny drop of milk. I asked her once why she bothers adding it at all, and she told me it's surprising what a huge difference even the smallest amount of milk makes. Now it's hard not to make her a drink without thinking of this.

'So how are you and Aiden getting along?' she asks once she's filled me in on the investigation. There's nothing new to report, no sightings of Nicole or Kayla; it's as if they never existed.

If this was Sophie I was talking to, the Sophie from before, I would tell her what had happened last night with Aiden, explain to her that I'm not sure how to feel about it and welcome her advice. She would hand it to me straight, no pussyfooting around. I have a feeling Marianne would too, but I'm not about to make her cross a professional line, no matter how comfortable I feel with her.

'It's nice spending time with him,' I offer. 'It feels like the right thing to do.'

She smiles. 'It's great that you're supporting each other. Especially when you have a complex history. I admire you both for that. Something like this can either tear a couple apart or bring them closer, and I see it's done the latter for you.' She holds up her hand. 'Not that I'm suggesting you're a couple.'

I sense that a question lurks beneath this statement. 'It does feel like we are,' I admit. 'I know that might sound weird, but I'm here often, and our whole lives have become about finding Kayla. Or waiting for her, because, to be honest, that's what it feels like we're doing more than anything else.' Like we're standing still, futile, while the world keeps moving forward around us, taking us further away from Kayla.

Marianne nods. 'I know it's frustrating, and you can't see everything that's being done, but we really are putting everything into searching for Kayla. So in a way you're right, but while you're both here in this house, seemingly just waiting, we're constantly moving for you.'

I want to take comfort from her words. Marianne is a person I can believe in, but can I say the same for anyone else involved in the investigation when I've barely had any dealings with them? Aiden has been the one who's been at the forefront of this because of our complex situation.

‘Doesn’t everyone assume that Kayla’s not in danger because she’s with the woman she thinks of as her mother? How can there be the same sense of urgency there would be if a stranger had abducted her?’ I don’t know why I’m bringing this up again when Marianne has heard me say it many times before. Same sentiment, different words. She always has an answer that seems to pacify me, at least for a while.

‘Until we find Kayla and bring her back home, everyone will be working as hard as they possibly can to find her. I promised you that when I first met you and I’m still making that promise now. And take comfort from this: Kayla’s with someone she knows. The childminder was convinced it was Nicole who she ran to.’ Again, this is nothing we haven’t been over before.

‘I try every day, sometimes it just gets so hard to keep that hope alive.’

She nods. ‘I imagine it’s even harder after not having had her in your life all these years.’

‘It’s like a cruel joke the universe is playing. Karma or something. Just when I come back to try to make up for everything, she’s snatched away from me.’

Marianne offers a sympathetic smile. ‘Yes, I can understand that. Looking back, are you sure you can’t think of anything at all about Nicole that set off any alarm bells? Was there anything she said or did? Even just an offhand remark.’

I’ve had plenty of time to think about precisely this, pull it apart in my mind, inspect every interaction I had with Nicole, but there’s nothing other than her suddenly becoming cold towards me. I tell this to Marianne.

‘And I know you’ve said before that Aiden hinted at her behaviour seeming out of character, but are you sure you can’t think of why this might be?’

‘No. He was very protective of Nicole; he didn’t want to give anything about her away. I think he thought he’d be betraying her, and if there’s one thing I know about Aiden it’s that he’s fiercely loyal.’

Marianne frowns. ‘Unfortunately, some people don’t deserve our loyalty. I hope Aiden’s not beating himself up about it.’

‘Yes and no. He’s quite pragmatic about things. He believes that people are responsible for their own actions. I was worried he’d blame me for this because I came back and shook up their lives, maybe inadvertently pushing Nicole into taking such drastic action. But he told me he doesn’t. He said Nicole did this herself and she’s the only one at fault.’

‘That sounds like a decent man to me,’ Marianne says. ‘And believe me, there aren’t many of those around. I should know.’ She pauses. ‘Did I tell you I’m divorced?’

Marianne’s openness is exactly why I sometimes forget I’m talking to a police officer rather than someone I’ve known for years. ‘I didn’t know. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. He was an arsehole. The whole time we were married he was involved with another woman. Younger than me of course. What a cliché. I think he would have carried on lying to this day if he hadn’t got her pregnant.’ Marianne says all this with no hint of bitterness or jealousy, and I admire her even more for that. ‘Still, at least he did the right thing and stood by her. Think they’re married now. I wish her the best of luck.’

Images of Maya flash into my head. And Connor. He wanted to stand by her but wasn’t given a chance. I’ve forgiven him for what he did when he threatened me because his actions came from his suffering. Since Kayla was taken neither of them have crossed my mind much, but Marianne has just reminded me there was something Connor mentioned that I initially dismissed. He’d said something about me having enemies. At the time I’d thought he might mean people who knew what I’d done, like Sophie and Aiden. Jamie even. But could he have been talking about Nicole? Is it possible he saw her at my flat? Maybe he even spoke to her. I’d been meaning to check on Maya after he confronted me that night, but Kayla’s disappearance erased everything else from my mind. Until now.

Marianne is still talking, something about humans having a remarkable ability to deal with anything life throws at them. ‘We’re quite astounding really, aren’t we?’ she says, and I nod my agreement, my mind distracted with thoughts of talking to Maya.

It’s another hour before Marianne says she has to go, and as soon as I’ve closed the door I text Maya, practically begging her to meet up with me. I’m clearly crossing some teacher/student boundary, but right now I don’t even know if I’ll ever be able to teach again. Nicole could have taken Kayla to a different country, and if that’s what she’s done then how will we ever get her back?

In the back of my mind the niggling thought stays with me for the rest of the day: *Maya's boyfriend knows something, and I need to know what that is.*

THIRTY-EIGHT

Now

‘How did it go with Marianne?’ Aiden asks when he gets home. He plants a kiss on my cheek, reminding me of the time before. That’s how I’ve come to think of my life before leaving. I have no idea how to label the present time, but it doesn’t matter; all that’s important is finding Kayla.

‘It’s always good to see her. There’s just never any news, or anything new to focus on with the search.’

He sinks into the sofa and sighs. ‘People keep asking me how I’m able to go to work,’ he says, ‘and it feels truly horrible. There I am, drawing up plans for people’s houses, to help make their lives better, while our little girl is probably crying for me every day. Am I a bad person, Eve?’

I shake my head. ‘No, of course not. It’s how you’re able to function and carry on.’ We’d talked about this when Nicole first took Kayla, and I completely understood why Aiden needed to keep working, to cling on to some part of his life that was still normal. ‘I also need to keep this roof over our heads,’ he’d said. ‘Nicole could come to her senses at any moment; and what would happen if they came back and I’d lost the house?’ His anguish had been palpable, and I’d wanted to reach out and hold him right then, even though I kept my distance. It was many weeks until we were comfortable with each other, almost carrying on as though I’d never left them those years ago.

‘Until it happens to you,’ Aiden continues, ‘you imagine you’d be out there every day, searching the streets every waking hour, but the truth of it is we’re just helpless, aren’t we? Waiting for Nicole to see sense and bring her back.’

Even though my thoughts about it mirror his, I wonder if there is actually more we could be doing. That might just mean going over the same things we’ve already done, but at least it’s action. ‘Can’t we approach Nicole’s parents again?’ I suggest. ‘And her sister? See if there’s anything else they can tell us?’

‘I already emailed them all again yesterday. They’ve been really supportive, Eve – I don’t think they’d be holding anything back from me.

They're just as angry with Nicole as I am. They still can't believe she's done this.'

'And her friends? What if we contacted them again?'

Aiden shakes his head. 'Nothing's changed. They're also on our side. Nobody's heard a thing from her. They'd be telling the police if they had. Damn it! I just want her back!' He stands up, and his eyes glisten. 'Sorry,' he says. 'I'll be back in a minute.'

When he leaves the room, I check my phone to see if Maya's replied, even though I would have heard the alert if she had. There's nothing. She probably won't ever respond to my message, and I can't just sit around and wait. I need to take some action. For Kayla. And for Aiden. For my family.

Aiden doesn't know where I've really gone. I'd told him I was going back to my flat to pick up some things, but I had another reason for wanting to head out. He would tell me I'm being crazy, if he knew the truth, and say that there's no way my ex-student can help us find Kayla. No way at all. Realistically, I know this, but I've had enough of standing still; I need to do *something*.

Even though it doesn't mean that Maya's home, I'm relieved to see there are lights on in her parents' house, meaning somebody at least should answer the door.

Unfortunately, it's Bal who does, and she stares at me, frowning and silent. Maya must have told her the truth about Kayla by now, and I have no doubt that she's the type of woman who is audacious enough to confront me about it. I exhale and prepare to defend myself.

'Hi, I'm sure you remember me? Maya's English tutor. I'm sorry to turn up like this but I really need to speak to her. I wouldn't have come if it wasn't so important.'

Bal leans forward, pulling the door with her. 'You knew, didn't you? That Maya was pregnant.'

'Yes. She confided in me during one of our sessions, and I couldn't betray her by telling you. I promise you, Bal, I tried my best to get her to talk to you. That was the only advice I gave her. I never advised her on what she should do about the baby, please believe that.'

Bal doesn't respond, her stony expression remaining in place. 'Why should I believe anything you say when you've proven yourself to be a liar? What are you doing here? What do you want from Maya?'

Although it hasn't been my plan, it's unlikely I'll get through the door if I don't tell Bal as much as I can. 'If you let me come in, I'll explain everything. Please, Bal. I can't talk out here on the doorstep.'

After some hesitation, she agrees, leading me into the lounge. It takes ten minutes to explain why I lied about not having a daughter, and even though I see flickers of judgement in her eyes while I'm speaking, at least she is listening, saving her opinion until she's heard all I have to say.

'You had postnatal depression,' she states. 'Maya didn't explain this clearly. She said you left because you'd made the wrong decision about having a child, and she didn't want to do the same.'

Chinese whispers, I think. Maya would never have taken everything I said and concluded that I simply regretted having a baby. Still, that's not important here. 'Bal, I promise you I had no intention of swaying Maya in either direction. I kept telling her it was her choice alone, nobody else's.' *Not even Connor's – not when it comes down to it.*

'That's not what bothers me,' Bal says. 'A termination was the right thing for her. She's not ready to have a baby. And I'm not ashamed to say I told her exactly how we felt about it. You spend so many years educating your daughters about contraception and then they go and... have an accident.' She shakes her head. 'It makes me sad. Maya's not the first and she won't be the last. I'm not heartless, I just want what's best for my daughters. I'm sure you're the same – now.'

Her dig doesn't go unnoticed. 'Yes, I just want Kayla to be confident to make her own choices. Good ones I hope. They may not always be, but I'll be there to support her, no matter what.' My turn to have a dig. I wonder how everything was resolved between Maya and her parents after that night she came to my flat, desperate to avoid going home.

'It's not always as easy as that,' Bal says, shaking her head. 'You'll find that out when your girl gets older.'

I catch my breath. Will I get to see Kayla growing older? Or is she Nicole's now – a punishment that the universe has dished out to me. *But it's not just you – it's Aiden too, and he did nothing to deserve this.*

'Please, Bal. Can I just talk to Maya quickly?'

‘You still haven’t explained why you need to speak to her. What’s this all about?’

Here goes. I only hope it convinces Bal to help me. I tell her what’s happened to Kayla and, as she listens, her face softens.

‘Missing? That’s awful. I’m sorry,’ she says once I’ve explained. ‘And you think her stepmother took her somewhere?’

‘Technically Nicole isn’t really her stepmother. They weren’t married.’

She ignores this. ‘I don’t understand how Maya can help, though?’

It might be best to be totally honest and explain that Connor turned up to confront me, but once again I don’t feel it’s my business to talk about Maya’s boyfriend to her mother. Experience has taught me that she wouldn’t appreciate this. ‘I just need to know if Maya ever saw anyone hanging around my flat when she came for tutoring sessions. We’re assuming it’s Nicole, but the police aren’t ruling out any possibilities.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Bal says. ‘Unfortunately, Maya’s not here. She moved out weeks ago and is living with one of her friends.’

She’s not going to make this easy for me. ‘Do you think you could give me the address? I’d really appreciate it, and it might just help find my daughter.’

Bal ponders this for a moment. ‘Well, I suppose. What kind of person would I be if I didn’t help another mother who needed it?’

I may have jumped over one hurdle but getting Maya to help me won’t be as easy. The fact that she hasn’t replied to my text speaks volumes, especially as we didn’t leave things on bad terms. *What is it, Maya? Why won’t you talk to me?*

Her new home is only ten minutes from her parents’, in a huge block of flats on an estate in Barking, which couldn’t be more different from her family’s leafy, tree-lined street. Things must have been bad for her to prefer living here, I think, before reminding myself that the young often value space and privacy away from their parents and would probably place this over luxury most times. Still, I can’t help but shudder to know that this is where Maya has chosen to be.

There’s no intercom system, so I walk straight up the stairs to Maya’s flat. A young red-haired girl answers the door, holding it open for me

without saying a word.

‘Oh!’ she says, ‘I thought you were someone else. Can I help?’

‘I’ve come to see Maya. Is she home?’

‘Um, she’s... who are you?’

‘I’m her English tutor.’

The girl’s eyes widen. ‘Her tutor? But she’s finished her—’

‘It’s okay,’ a voice from the hallway says. Maya. Sounding different somehow, older maybe.

Then she appears beside her friend, and I can hardly believe she’s the same girl. How is it possible to change so much in only a few months? Heavy make-up masks her face, making her look much older than eighteen. Her long wavy hair has gone, replaced with a straighter, shoulder-length bob.

‘What are you doing here, miss?’

Some things never change, and I can’t help but smile at the way she still addresses me. ‘Can we talk?’

She turns to her friend as if needing confirmation, but the red-haired girl just smiles and watches both of us.

‘I suppose.’ She turns to her flatmate. ‘Lara, is that okay? I won’t be long and then we can get out of here.’

It’s only then that I notice both girls are dressed for a night out: short skirts and sparkly tops, heels far too high for anyone to walk comfortably in.

‘I won’t keep you,’ I promise them both.

Inside, the flat is as dingy as I’d expected it to be, although they’ve done their best to brighten it up with modern prints and artificial flowers. There’s no avoiding the stained dark blue carpet, though, which doesn’t match anything in the house. This is not Maya. At least not the girl I used to know. But judging from what I’ve seen so far – how do I know who that was? Standing here is surreal, and I can’t quite make sense of it.

Lara announces that she’s going to finish getting ready, and leaves Maya and me alone.

Maya speaks first. ‘How did you find me?’ She sits on the tatty sofa, crossing her legs and leaning forward.

There’s no invitation for me to sit too, so I stay standing. ‘Your mum gave me your address. I went there when you didn’t reply to my text.’

‘I’ve been busy,’ she says with no hint of guilt or embarrassment.

‘How did your exams go?’

‘Is that what you wanted to see me for?’

‘No, but I’m interested. I always like to know how my students get on after tutoring.’

She shrugs. ‘They went fine.’

‘Then you’re at uni now? What degree did you decide on?’

‘None. I’m taking a year out. To reassess my life.’ I should have known this. Something about Maya alerted me to it.

‘Well, deferring a year is often a good idea. What will you do?’

Maya holds her hand up. ‘Miss, this feels like a police interrogation. Can you just stop being a teacher and tell me what you’re doing here?’

I sit next to her. ‘Okay. Remember I told you about my daughter Kayla? She’s gone missing. It looks like my husband’s girlfriend took her.’

Maya softens, just as her mother did earlier. ‘I’m so sorry. That’s really... awful.’

‘Yes, it’s been a very difficult time for me and her dad.’

She frowns. ‘But didn’t he hate you? After you left and everything.’

‘Yes, he did. Something like this has a way of bringing people together, though, so we’re putting aside everything else to focus on Kayla.’

She nods. ‘I don’t see how I can help.’

‘I know this might be difficult for you to talk about, but it involves Connor.’

Her eyes widen, and she folds her arms across her body. A defensive gesture that suggests talking about him will cause her pain. But I need to do this. ‘I don’t understand,’ she says. ‘What’s any of this got to do with Connor?’

I tell her about him paying me a visit, how threatening his behaviour was, how he left with the comment about me having enemies.

‘What a bastard,’ she says, then claps her hand over her mouth. ‘Sorry.’

‘Please don’t apologise. He was just hurt, Maya. I’m sure he wouldn’t have done anything to me.’

‘Who knows? People are capable of anything, aren’t they?’ This is the old Maya back, the one I remember. ‘Wait a minute. You don’t think he took your daughter, do you? Or helped that woman take her?’

‘No, I don’t. I mean, it’s possible, but I don’t think Nicole needed any help. To the outside world, Kayla was her daughter. It wouldn’t have been suspicious to anyone. That’s how she’s got away with this.’

‘Then what’s Connor got to do with it?’

‘I think he was... watching me for a while. Waiting for the right moment to get to me. And I think he might have seen someone else hanging around my flat, otherwise why would he have mentioned enemies?’

She shrugs. ‘I don’t know.’

‘So, you never got back together then?’

‘No. No way. He scared me by how aggressive he became because I wanted a termination. He just wasn’t the guy I thought he was.’

‘I’m sorry he didn’t support you,’ I say.

She rolls her eyes. ‘He’d say that I was the one who didn’t support him. He had this thing about girls expecting the guy to always watch out for them, and he used to say why can’t it work both ways? You know, we want equal rights and all that then we still want to be looked after. What a ridiculous stereotype. How did I ever find him attractive?’

‘Sometimes we don’t see who someone really is until extreme circumstances are thrown at us. Better to know now, though, than find out after years, or marriage or kids.’

Maya nods. ‘Yeah. True.’

‘So do you know where he lives now?’

‘I heard he moved to east London to live with his cousin. Doing all right for himself.’ She stares around the room. ‘Not like me. No uni, just a part-time job in Starbucks.’

‘Oh, Maya. What happened? How did you end up here?’

Tears fall from her eyes, sliding down her cheeks and dripping onto her top, blending in with the sparkles. My heart aches for her. ‘I just... everything changed after the... termination. I just didn’t feel like the same person. I wasn’t expecting to feel guilty. I was so sure of my decision that it never occurred to me I might regret it.’

‘And do you?’

She shakes her head. ‘I don’t know. Maybe. Sometimes. I see babies everywhere and wonder what mine would have looked like. I dream about babies, too. It’s horrible. I thought I’d just get on with my life and never look back but...’

‘I’m so sorry. Were you offered any counselling?’

‘Yeah, I had some before and after but thought I was okay. That I didn’t need it. I’m strong, right? I can handle anything.’ She rolls her eyes. ‘Then I got my A-level results, which were really good, and I should have been

excited, but instead I felt numb, like it didn't matter any more. I met Lara, and she just works and parties and enjoys herself. I looked at her and thought: I need a bit of that.'

I want Maya to know that it's not too late for her. This is only the beginning of her life. She has her whole future ahead of her and this is just a temporary interruption. 'Maya, it's not bad to take some time out for yourself. At any age. But please don't give up on your dreams. Start afresh next September and, in the meantime, I don't think it's wrong to just live a bit, get it out of your system.'

She wipes her eyes and grabs her phone from the coffee table. 'Thanks, miss. Let me just find Connor's address. And I'm coming with you. I can't let you go to that arsehole's place on your own – who knows what he'll do?'

THIRTY-NINE

Before

Fight or flight mode. It's our body's way of protecting us against threats, an innate survival instinct kicking in. But I think there's also a third option. One where you do neither of these things, instead becoming frozen, almost accepting of your situation.

It feels as though I've done nothing so far, which is why today I've found the energy to take action. Maybe this will be it, a way to climb out of this hole, instead of letting the soil bury me deeper.

The doctor's waiting room is full today, and I sit in the corner, hoping to disappear into the wall. Perhaps when they call my name, I'll stay silent and pretend it's not me, and then when they've given up, baffled, I could get up and leave. This surgery is big and impersonal enough for me to do that.

'Eve Conway?'

The doctor's standing by the door, searching faces, and without wanting to I stand and make my way towards her, my legs taking control of my brain. Too late now. Too late for anything.

In her office, she introduces herself as Dr Humphreys, and I take a seat while she settles behind her desk, typing something onto her computer. 'Now,' she says, with a smile, 'what can I do for you today?'

Even though her tone is friendly, for a moment I consider making up some problem with my periods or something similar, because it feels as though I will never get the truth out. But I'm here now – I have to keep going.

'I, um, something... I've just had a baby and I think I'm really struggling.' There, it's done. Some of the truth, at least, is now out there and can't be taken back.

Dr Humphreys stops typing and gives me her full attention. 'I see. Okay, why don't you tell me exactly what's going on and then we can see how best to help you?'

Finally. Someone kind who can help me. So why does this fill me with dread? There are so many things I won't be able to tell her, so how can she really help me? 'I... can't seem to bond with my baby. I know it can take

time, but she's nearly three months old now, and surely it should have happened by now?'

'Not at all. These things can take time. It's all perfectly understandable. Your hormones are still all over the place, and you're a new mum on top of that. Who wouldn't have a bit of a wobble?' She smiles, and more than anything I want to believe her, and have faith that I can get help.

Now is my chance to tell her it's more than this, so much more, to tell her the truth. All of it. Free myself from this prison I've created with my silence. But I can't even form the thoughts, let alone say the words.

I lean forward and try to smile. 'Yes, I know you're right. It just takes time to get back to normal, then?' I ask this even though for me there no longer is a *normal*.

She starts typing again, and I let myself get lost in the click of her nails on the keyboard. 'I'm just going to ask you a few questions,' she says.

Then she is asking me about suicidal thoughts and thoughts of harming my baby, forcing me to snap to attention. I can't have her making a record of these things about me, there for medical staff to see for the rest of my life.

Lie, lie, lie.

'No. Nothing at all like that. It's more just feeling low and... not really coping with the newborn stage.'

Tap tap tap.

By the end of her questions she is smiling, and I feel as though I've just passed an exam. Any minute now she will congratulate me and hand me a certificate.

'Well, judging from your responses, it looks like you could have the baby blues. It's very common. You have no previous episodes of depression, so I'm fairly confident that this will pass if you get the right support.' She opens her desk drawer and pulls out a card. 'This is a free online counselling service where trained counsellors offer cognitive behaviour therapy. It's all done on your computer or tablet whenever is convenient for you. I really recommend it. All sorts of issues can be addressed by CBT, and this online service is definitely the way forward. No long waiting lists or having to travel miles for sessions. Give it a go and see how you get on. But in the meantime, if you start to feel worse in any way, please do come back here straightaway.'

Nodding, I take the card and thank her, feeling even worse leaving her office than I did walking in. Because now it seems clear to me that there's nobody who can help me.

'Thanks for looking after her,' I say to Mum. She's rooting through her kitchen drawer while Kayla sleeps on a huge cushion on the floor. I should question Mum about whether she is safe lying there like that, but I don't have the energy. Kayla is breathing, and Mum is right here with her.

'What are you looking for?' I ask.

'A stamp. I know I bought some the other day and I always keep them in the drawer, so I don't know where they've got to.'

It's happening again. 'I thought you kept them in your purse. In case you need one when you're out.' This has been what Mum has always done, so it's strange that she's questioning it.

'No, I don't,' she protests. 'I keep them right here. I always have done.'

'Do me a favour, Mum – will you just have a quick look in your purse, just to humour me?'

She stares at me with wide angry eyes, as if I've just accused her of a crime. 'Fine,' she hisses, heading to the hall, where her bag sits on the phone table. 'But I'll expect an apology after, Eve.'

When she returns and delves into her purse, she frowns and pulls out a new book of stamps. 'How strange. I must have put them there by mistake.' She glances at me. 'I remember now – I was really distracted that day and wasn't concentrating. Well, at least I've got them now. How funny that I put them in my purse.'

There is no way I will point out that this is where she has kept them since I was a child.

Later, while we sit down with coffee and wait for Kayla to wake up, I ask Mum if she'll make a doctor's appointment. 'Just so they can put your mind at ease... about these little things you keep forgetting.'

She stares at me. 'What do you mean? What exactly are you saying, Eve? That I'm losing my mind or something?'

'No, of course not, I just—'

'I think you should go now,' she says, standing up and taking my unfinished mug of coffee from me.

‘Mum, Kayla’s still sleeping.’

‘Just go!’ she screams, her voice a high-pitched screech.

Kayla’s eyes ping open, and she quickly begins to cry, the deafening sound mingling with Mum’s shouts for me to get out.

And as I drive home, with Kayla sobbing in her car seat, Mum’s behaviour, together with that text message, make my head feel like it will explode at any moment. And I drive far too fast, way too recklessly, my mind envisaging smashing at full speed into a lamppost.

FORTY

Now

Unlike Maya's flat, Connor's is surprisingly nice. It's more of a maisonette, on a road similar to mine.

'Bet you didn't expect him to live in a place like this,' Maya says, folding her arms and stopping outside the small gate.

'I try not to make assumptions,' I say.

Before tonight, I didn't know anything about Connor other than what I saw for myself the night he forced his way into my flat. On the drive over here, Maya told me that his cousin owns a car valeting business, and Connor works with him now. 'They're doing very well,' she'd pointed out. 'And he hasn't even been to uni.'

'You don't have to come in with me,' I tell her now. The minute we got in the car I regretted not insisting that she stay at her flat. She should be on her night out with Lara. I shouldn't be dragging her into this.

'Oh, I want to see him. We've got unfinished business.'

Maya sounds so adamant that I give up trying to talk her out of it. Yet despite the strength and determination she's exhibiting, surely underneath there must be some apprehension. 'Do you miss him?' I ask.

There is no hesitation in her answer. 'No. I hate him.' She turns to me. 'I know you're going to tell me that hating someone isn't good, but I can't help how I feel. It doesn't mean I lose sleep over him.'

The thing is, she probably does. Whatever's happened since, the two of them share something that can't be erased, no matter how much time passes. They will forever be linked by Maya's unplanned pregnancy.

'It doesn't look like anyone's in,' I say, focusing on the task at hand. I can't get distracted by the past – even Maya's – because Kayla's future is all that matters right now.

Maya tuts. 'No. He's probably out drinking with his stupid friends.'

It never occurred to me to think what I would do if Connor wasn't in. 'Let's check,' I say.

Halfway to the front door, Maya begins to giggle.

‘Sorry,’ she says when I ask her what she’s laughing at. ‘This is just weird, isn’t it? You were my English tutor and now we’re here on a hunt for your daughter. It’s just...’

‘Surreal? Yes, I know.’

She grabs my arm. ‘Let’s do this.’

Despite the lack of lights in the place, Connor is at home, opening the door and staring at us, his eyes wide with shock. ‘What the hell?’ he says. ‘What is this?’

‘You remember me, don’t you, Connor? I just need a word with you. Can we come in?’

‘Are you crazy? I’m not letting you in here.’ Although he’s talking to me, his eyes are fixed on Maya, a clear demonstration that his feelings for her still exist. Her presence here has floored him, which can only work to my advantage.

Stepping forward, Maya takes over. ‘Let us in, Connor. Eve’s daughter’s been taken, and we need to help find her.’

He frowns. ‘Taken by who?’

Maya steps forward. ‘Let us in and we’ll tell you everything.’

‘But how am I supposed to help? It’s got nothing to do with me.’ Connor turns to me. ‘You can’t think that just cos I threatened you a bit I’d take your *daughter*. That’s sick, man.’

‘That’s not what I think at all,’ I assure him, even though it has indeed crossed my mind. ‘And you’re not in any trouble. She’s been missing for three months now, so the police would have already knocked on your door if I’d mentioned you, wouldn’t they?’

He digests my words then slowly nods. ‘I s’ppose.’

Inside Connor’s flat, the lights are dimmed, but I can see enough to know that this property is cared for. He doesn’t invite us to sit down, but we do anyway, and even though he’s scowling, he also sits, opposite Maya, his eyes fixed on her.

‘What do you think I can do?’ he asks, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees.

‘That night you came to see me,’ I begin, ‘it wasn’t the first time you’d been to my flat, was it?’

He glances at Maya but she looks away.

‘It’s okay,’ I say. ‘Maya knows everything. And we both understand why you were so angry with me.’

‘She had nothing to do with my decision, Con,’ Maya says. ‘Nothing. I made it by myself. And I’m sorry it hurt you.’

Now it’s Connor’s turn to look away, his eyes glassing over. ‘I don’t want to talk about it. It’s done, isn’t it?’

Maya nods. ‘Yes, it is. Please just help Eve.’

Even though I’ve been telling Maya for a long time that she can call me by my first name, it’s funny to actually hear her doing it now when until tonight she hasn’t been able to.

Connor lets out a huge sigh, stares at the floor. ‘No, it wasn’t the first time.’

‘And when you were in my flat you told me I had a lot of enemies. Do you remember that? I called you back to explain what you meant, but you ignored me. Connor, I really need to know why you said that.’

He shrugs. ‘It was nothing. I was just talking.’

Maya stands up. ‘What the hell, Connor? Just tell me what you meant! You don’t say something like that for no reason.’

‘All right, calm down, will you? No need to get hysterical.’

‘There’s every need, Connor, when a little girl is gone.’

Seconds tick by and nobody says anything. I could urge him, and try my best to persuade him, but I feel as though he will give in before long. He’s not telling us to leave, which means there’s every chance he will tell me what I need to know.

Finally, he speaks. ‘I was watching your flat,’ he says. ‘I had to. Didn’t know anything about you so I had to get a feel for your movements.’

‘You need help, Connor!’ Maya declares. ‘That’s just disgusting. That’s stalking, that is.’

He glares at her. ‘I thought you wanted my help?’

‘Yes, we do,’ I say before he and Maya get into something. ‘Please carry on.’

‘I was there one night, and I saw someone smash your windows. Made my day, that did. Showed me that you deserved everything you got, if I wasn’t the only one wanting to mess you up.’

Maya throws up her arms. ‘Will you—’

‘Wait,’ I say. ‘Are you telling the truth? It really wasn’t you who smashed my car?’

He looks pleased with himself. ‘Nope. I didn’t care about your car – it was *you* I wanted to smash up.’

Maya picks up a cushion and hurls it across the room at him. ‘Jesus, Connor, you really are a piece of work.’

‘It’s okay, Maya.’ I stand up and move closer to Connor. ‘This woman who smashed my car windows. What did she look like?’ Nicole’s image floats around my head. How friendly and kind she looked when I first met her, definitely not the kind of woman who would smash car windows. Or take a child.

‘What are you on about? It wasn’t a she. It was a man.’

The ground shifts beneath me. Connor must have got this wrong. ‘A man? That can’t be right.’

‘Listen, I was right there, hiding behind a car and got a good solid look at the guy. Believe me, it was definitely a man. And he was mad as hell.’

A man. A man who hates me enough to do something like that.

My mind searches for answers. Answers I don’t want to believe. I wanted to believe that it was all over. I try to explore other options. It was the day Jamie ended our relationship, and I’d spent the day drinking in a bar. *Jamie*. He was so angry with me, so it would make sense. But my mind struggles to believe Jamie would have done that.

‘If I showed you a picture, would you recognise him?’

‘Course.’

Flicking through my phone I quickly search my photos for one of Jamie. There’s only one – a selfie Jamie took of us on his phone and then sent to me. I hadn’t wanted to take it; he spent a long time nagging me to until I gave in. How horrible that I never wanted pictures of us. No wonder he felt as though I didn’t care.

I hand my phone to Connor and wait for him to confirm what I already know.

‘Nope,’ he says – handing it back – ‘that’s not the guy. He looked nothing like that.’

Then that only leaves one option. I flick through my phone again, typing into Google until the image I want comes up. ‘Is this him?’ I ask, showing Connor the image I’ve found.

This time, Connor frowns, studies the picture for too long. After what seems like minutes he looks away from the screen.

‘Nah, that’s not him either.’

Hearing Connor say this, all of a sudden everything becomes clear. I know exactly who smashed my car windows. And it’s all I can do to stop

my legs giving way beneath me.

FORTY-ONE

Before

I knew when I woke up this morning that I was heading towards something. Or hurtling. Spiralling. My head was fuzzy, unable to make sense of anything – and still is now, hours later. Perhaps this is my new normal, what's to be expected for someone like me.

Only one more hour until I can put Kayla to bed and say goodbye to another day where I don't even know what I've done or accomplished.

'Shall we have a bath?' I say to Kayla in the sing-song voice I've managed to perfect. Babies pick up on tone of voice apparently, so this is one way I keep her protected from the ugly truth about me.

I hold her while we watch the bubbles, and then I place her in the bath seat and gently wash her. She seems happy this evening and giggles as the soapsuds slide down her arms; baths usually have a calming effect on her, and I wish she could stay in here until bedtime. But her skin is new and sensitive, so it has to be a quick splash only, and then I will face her anger while I fight to get her dry and into a sleepsuit. I've almost become immune to this all now, accepting of it, even though I know I'm one bird step away from being tipped over the edge.

She's so helpless, lying there, unable to move and dependent on me for everything. Her life is in my hands – more responsibility than I could ever have imagined. This thought inflates and expands in my head until it's crushing my skull.

I glance at the tap. If I just turned it on, it would fill the whole bath up with water until it was over her tiny head, and she wouldn't be able to save herself. I shake my head. *No, no no.* But the thought is there, sticking to my skull, and I am unable to dislodge it. *Do it, do it, do it.*

And then I am screaming and lifting Kayla out of the bath, clutching her to me and wrapping her in a towel. Tears stream down my face as I whisper to her. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry.* Over and over.

But no apology will ever make up for the monster I am.

Later, I pretend to be asleep when Aiden comes home. He's been at a work leaving do tonight, so it's past midnight when he slips into bed. He wouldn't have recognised me if he'd come home at his usual time. He would have seen a woman shaken and lost, unrecognisable. Broken. There was no way tonight I would have been able to hide what I've managed to hide for these months. That, if given the chance, I am a woman capable of the worst atrocity.

I leave it until Aiden's breathing signals that he's in a deep sleep and then I grab some clothes and get dressed. The suitcase I packed earlier with essential items is already in my car; there is plenty I'm not taking and I don't care about leaving anything behind.

Sitting on the bed, I watch Aiden for a minute, taking in every detail of him, capturing a photo in my mind that I'll be able to retrieve at any time. And then I stand over Kayla's cot. *This is for the best, my darling girl. Mummy isn't safe to be around. You deserve so much better than this; so much better than the hand you were dealt. None of this is your fault; please don't ever believe that it is.*

My eyes are pools of tears as I silently say goodbye to my child. I desperately want to scoop her up and hold her to me, take in her baby scent just one last time.

Finally, I feel what I wanted to from the very beginning. Love.

But it is far too late now.

FORTY-TWO

Now

Aiden's in the kitchen on his laptop when I get home. It's funny how I've come to think of it as my home over the past three months, even though it isn't and never will be. He looks up and smiles. 'Did you get everything you needed?'

'Yes, I've got a bag in the hall.'

'Great, that means you won't have to go home for a while, then.'

'We need to talk,' I say, sitting down opposite him.

Aiden's skin pales. 'What's happened? Is this about Kayla? Has Marianne said something?'

'Do you remember when someone smashed my car windows? Months ago.'

He frowns. 'Yeah, I told you Nicole did it.'

'Did she? It wasn't you?'

There's a pause before he answers. 'No. Absolutely no. Why would I have done that?'

'To warn me off. You didn't want me in Kayla's life then, did you?'

There's a long pause before he answers. 'You're right – I didn't. But I'm telling you now, I didn't do it.'

'Okay,' I say. 'Maybe it was Nicole. That would make sense, wouldn't it?'

Aiden shrugs. 'Nothing would surprise me about her. Nothing at all.'

'Do you want coffee?' I ask. Aiden is lying to me and I need to find out why. There is no need now, we are in each other's lives, fighting to find Kayla, so what reason would he have to keep the truth from me?

But he is not the only one lying. There could be a reason he has to, just like I have mine.

And I need to know what it is.

'What are you doing this evening?' I ask. I need to know I can trust Aiden, because finding Kayla depends on it.

'I've just been checking in with Nicole's friends on Facebook,' Aiden replies. 'They're still so shocked by it all.'

‘I’m sure they are,’ I say. ‘This isn’t something the Nicole they knew would do.’

‘I’ll kill her when I get my hands on her,’ he says.

As I boil the kettle I watch Aiden, his head buried back in his laptop. Confusion clouds my mind. One minute he is smashing my car windows, the next he is bringing Kayla to my flat, arranging for us to spend time together.

I shudder at this thought and fight every urge I have to flee this place. Is he the one who’s been sending me emails? Breaking into my flat? I need answers, and the only way to get them is to be right here with Aiden.

‘I’ve had an idea,’ Aiden says. ‘Shall we go and see your mum tomorrow? I’ve taken the day off, and it would be nice to see her again after all this time.’

I hand him his coffee. ‘You know she won’t recognise you, though? That can be quite hard to deal with.’

‘Oh, I know. But maybe you can explain who I am? And she loves Kayla, doesn’t she? Even if she doesn’t remember who she is. Maybe she’ll just like me as a person and not even need to know I’m your husband.’

The word sends me cold. ‘She’ll love you,’ I say. ‘She always did.’

He smiles. ‘Jackie. What a character she was. It’s so sad.’

‘We’ll go and see her,’ I say. I raise my mug. ‘Do you mind if I take this to bed? I don’t know why but I’m absolutely shattered tonight.’

He taps something on his laptop. ‘Go ahead. I’ll just finish up here and won’t be far behind you.’

As I turn and walk away, I wonder how I’m going to spend another minute, let alone nights or weeks here.

‘Which room?’

I spin around. ‘What’s that?’

‘Which room will you be sleeping in?’ The look of hope in his eyes turns my stomach.

‘Do you mind if I sleep in the spare room tonight? I’m just feeling a bit... I think I might have a cold coming.’

He frowns. ‘Of course. Wherever you feel comfortable.’

‘Just tonight,’ I assure him, and as I head upstairs I pray that something will happen tomorrow to help me trust him.

In the morning Aiden brings me coffee and toast.

‘What’s this for?’ I ask, sliding myself up in bed.

‘You said you weren’t feeling well last night, so I wanted to do this for you. It’s not much, just some jam on toast. To be honest, I couldn’t sleep so I just got up. Keeping busy takes my mind off everything. Not that anything does really, but you know what I mean. I’ve already had three coffees.’

I have to remember this. Aiden is suffering too. I am not the only one who has lost Kayla. ‘Thanks,’ I say. ‘It’s kind of you.’

‘How are you feeling today anyway?’

‘Okay. I think the sleep helped. I’m all ready to visit Mum.’ And to find out why Aiden lied. I’m itching to search through his things, although that will have to wait until I’m alone in the house.

‘Who’s this?’ Mum asks when we arrive. I’d called ahead to ask the carers to let her know I’d be bringing someone, even though now it doesn’t seem there was much point.

Aiden steps forward and shakes her hand. ‘Hi Jackie, I’m Aiden.’ He waits for signs of recognition, but Mum only stares at him blankly.

‘That’s a nice name,’ she says. ‘Come in and have tea.’

‘A coffee would be lovely, thanks Jackie.’

Mum looks around the room. ‘I, um, I think I don’t—’

‘We can make it, Mum,’ I say, placing my hand on her shoulder. ‘Aiden, would you mind getting coffee from the residents’ lounge?’

Aiden agrees and when he’s left the room, I feel as though I can breathe again, albeit temporarily.

‘What a lovely man,’ Mum declares. ‘I knew you’d find someone special. You just need to settle down and start a family now. You’re still young enough. You don’t want to leave it too late though.’

‘We’re just friends,’ I say, safe in the knowledge that Aiden can’t hear. It’s better that I get this out of the way now, even though there’s every chance Mum will mention it again once he’s back.

‘Oh, that’s a shame,’ Mum says. ‘I do wish you’d find someone nice.’

I wish I could tell her about Jamie – how I had someone decent and didn't value him. All I need is Kayla, though. Then Aiden's lie won't matter.

As if Mum can sense I'm thinking about my daughter, she asks about Kayla. 'What a lovely little girl. Why doesn't she come and see me any more?'

'I'm afraid we've got some sad news,' Aiden. Standing in the doorway, empty-handed. My heart almost stops; how long has he been standing there?

'Oh dear. What sad news? Where is she?'

'She's gone missing,' Aiden says. There are tears in his eyes, and I want to scream at him. *If you love our daughter then why are you lying to me?* This wasn't the man I married. The man it tore my heart to shreds to walk away from.

Mum clamps her hand to her mouth. 'That's terrible! What happened?'

'Well, my ex-girlfriend has taken her, and the police can't find either of them. She could be... on the other side of the world by now.'

'But I only saw her yesterday. We were right here doing a jigsaw.'

Aiden freezes. He's not used to dealing with Mum's dementia; he is wondering how it's possible that Kayla was here yesterday.

'She disappeared after you saw her,' I say to Mum.

Aiden visibly relaxes, and I spend the next hour planning my next move while Aiden charms Mum. He should realise that it's pointless; there's little likelihood of Mum even remembering Aiden if we ever visit together again, let alone remembering anything he says.

On the drive home, Aiden announces that he has to pop into work for a while.

'I thought you had the day off,' I say.

'I had an email when we were with Jackie, and there's something I need to sort out. A client wants to change something in the plans I've already finalised. Typical! It won't take long, though, to go through it with him. Will you be okay?'

'Of course. I'll just work on updating the missing posters and the website. I'm not giving up hope, Aiden. Ever. We're going to find our little

girl.'

With his eyes still fixed on the road, he reaches over and grabs my hand. 'This is why I still love you.'

His words are almost a whisper, barely audible above the hum of the engine, but I hear them clearly enough and they shoot spasms of pain through my body. I should say something in reply, but nothing comes out.

'Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I don't want to put any pressure on you, but I really do mean it. I thought I was over you, Eve, but I never really was.'

'Neither was I,' I say. 'I just... blocked it all out. Kayla being taken made me realise, though, that it's just me and you and our little girl. That's all that's important to me.'

'So, this Jamie – it really is over then?'

'Yes,' I say, squeezing Aiden's hand, while outside rain begins to splatter against the windscreen.

'Are you sure you'll be okay?' Aiden asks. 'I could try to get out of going to work. You just seem a bit... down.'

Maybe I haven't been doing a good enough job of hiding my suspicion. 'No, I'm fine, honestly. I just want Kayla back, that's all.'

When we pull up at the house, I have to hold myself back from rushing inside. If I can just act normally then everything will be okay.

As I wave goodbye to him and step inside, sadness fills my heart. How can the man I once loved have become someone I cannot trust?

Inside, I watch Aiden drive off and I lock the front door. If he comes back for any reason I will say that I heard noises and got worried. Now I can search the house with no fear of him catching me.

There's no need to check the kitchen; over the last three months I've come to know every inch of space in there, and there's nothing that isn't meant to be in a kitchen. There isn't even a drawer for junk or papers, so Aiden must keep everything in the bedroom or the desk in the spare room. Although I've been sleeping in the spare room – other than the night before last – I don't think Aiden would leave anything he didn't want me to find under my nose. Come to think of it, he's too smart to have anything in the

house at all, especially as he has no problem leaving me here alone, so my search is probably futile.

In the bedroom, I open the wardrobe and find no evidence Nicole even lived here. None of her clothes hang from the rails, and all I can find that might be hers is a pink and grey checked wool scarf. Strange, given that I'd heard Aiden telling the police Nicole had hardly taken anything to her sister's, therefore he'd expected her to come back and collect everything else.

I wasn't always here when Kayla first went missing; Aiden preferred to deal with the police alone and it's only now that it seems significant. Was it deliberate? If so, why?

By the time I've checked every room upstairs, including the bathroom, I'm certain that this house doesn't hold any answers.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out, expecting it to be Aiden. It's not though, it's Maya.

Are you okay? Have the police heard anything? Did you confront your ex?

Yesterday at Connor's flat, when I showed him Aiden's Facebook profile, I didn't let on that he was my daughter's father, the man I married, and neither Connor nor Maya would have realised. Maya only knows me as Eve Martin – my maiden name – so the surname Conway wouldn't have meant anything to her. When they asked who he was, the lie slipped easily from my tongue – just a disgruntled ex. Nobody I had anything to do with any more. I don't know if they believed me but they didn't ask any questions. After determining who had smashed my car, they were too busy discussing Maya's decision.

I send a reply immediately.

Not yet. Thanks for your help anyway. Both of you. I hope you two can be okay with each other.

Within seconds, Maya has replied.

Actually, funny story, but after you left we talked for hours and we're kind of sorting things. Doesn't feel good to be on bad terms with him.

Reading this brings a smile to my face. They might both be young but it's clear that they care deeply for one another. I send back three smiley faces and then it hits me.

There is someone who can help me. If they can only find a way to forgive me.

FORTY-THREE

Now

I'm not prepared for how I'll feel when I see him standing in front of me, the questioning look on his face which only makes him more attractive. For a few seconds we both stare at each other until he breaks the silence. 'What are you doing here?'

'I'm so sorry, Jamie, but I had to come. I know you probably don't want me inside your flat, so could we go somewhere to talk? It won't take long, I promise.'

He shakes his head. 'I said everything I had to say to you months ago, please don't do this.'

'No, you've got it all wrong. This isn't about our relationship.'

Now the frown appears once more. 'But there's nothing else we've got to say to each other.'

Jamie's leaving me no choice now – I'm going to have to tell him right here on his doorstep. 'My daughter is missing. And I really think you could help me if you could just spare me five minutes?'

It takes a moment for what I've said to sink in. 'Missing? That's awful. What happened?'

'Please, I'll tell you everything but can we just go somewhere and talk.'

Jamie's already patting his pockets and closing his door. 'The pub round the corner shouldn't be too busy. Come on.'

He won't let me buy the drinks and insists on getting them himself. I've only ordered an orange juice, and it feels wrong to let him spend even that amount on me with the way things were left between us, and the way I was during our relationship.

He sits opposite me and sips his beer while he waits for me to tell him what happened to Kayla three months ago. I hold back nothing, including

the part about practically moving in with Aiden, because he needs to know this.

Jamie listens silently until I've finished, and when he opens his mouth to speak I half expect him to tell me he wants nothing to do with this.

'So wait, one minute he's telling you he wants you to spend time with your daughter and the next he's smashing your car windows. That doesn't make sense.'

I nod. 'I know. And then he denied that he'd done it. I don't know what to think.'

'This doesn't feel right, Eve.'

'That morning in Leicester Square, you never told me how you found out about me leaving Kayla those years ago. I need to know who told you. I need to know whether or not it was Aiden.'

Jamie's answer comes without hesitation. 'It wasn't him.'

'Then who?'

'It was Nicole Richardson.'

Shock momentarily paralyses me. 'You know Nicole?'

'Yes... I mean no, not really – she just came to my flat one night and said she knew you and needed to talk to me about you. She said she had some information that I'd want to hear.'

'You didn't know her then? And you let her into your flat?' This doesn't sound like something Jamie would do. He's too cautious, too sensible.

'She had a photo on her phone – of you and a little girl – and said it was really important that she talked to me. Then she started crying and begging so I just... let her in.' He stops and waits for me to say something.

I can't be annoyed with him; I know how Nicole comes across. There's nothing disturbing about her, so it's understandable that Jamie wouldn't have been nervous about letting her into his home. 'Then what happened?'

He puts down his beer, and as he talks his eyes glance to the left. I remember reading somewhere that this is a sign of someone recalling a memory, a signal that they're telling the truth. After everything that's happened lately it feels as though I'll never trust anyone again, but at least I can still believe in Jamie. 'I got her some water,' he is saying. 'She just seemed so distraught. And then when she calmed down, she told me how you were married to her partner. Aiden. I knew she was telling the truth because you'd mentioned him before. She went on to tell me about Kayla,

and as you can imagine, it was like a punch to my gut. I mean, I knew you were a bit of a closed book, but I had no idea your past was so...'

I look away. 'I know, you don't need to say it.'

'She said you were trying to get Kayla back, and she convinced me that you wanted Aiden back as well. That you wanted to be a family again. She made out that you'd stop at nothing to make this happen.'

It's all starting to make sense now. Jamie is a reasonable man; he would have heard me out and listened to my reasons for leaving, unless he believed I wanted to be with someone else, that our relationship really was dead. Sadness overwhelms me – Jamie should never have been hurt like this. 'That wasn't true at all,' I tell him. 'I promise you.'

He doesn't respond. 'I'm so sorry, Eve. If I'd have just told you when you asked me then maybe she wouldn't have had a chance to take your daughter.'

'It's not your fault,' I say. 'She would have found a way.'

Jamie's eyes widen. 'I've just thought of something. If Aiden smashed up your car and then the next minute turned up at your place telling you he wanted to let you see your daughter, doesn't that suggest he had something planned?'

'What do you mean?' But even as I ask this, I think I already know the answer.

'Your daughter. What if he had no intention of letting you see her? What if he and Nicole arranged this whole thing?'

Hearing this, I am frozen. 'No... it can't be that.'

'How can you be sure?'

'I can't. But I need evidence.'

'Then get it,' Jamie tells me. 'I hope I'm wrong, but you need to at least find out for sure.'

'I'm just going to keep an eye on him,' I say. 'If, by any chance, he knows where Kayla is then he'll slip up. He's bound to. If I keep pushing him and getting him to do things he'll find hard when he knows Kayla isn't really missing, then he's bound to weaken. Lies can't be sustained forever.' This thought turns me cold. Sooner or later I will have to face my own.

'But you need to be careful. If you have any feelings for him—'

'I don't! I never wanted him back. I only ever wanted my daughter back in my life.'

Jamie doesn't look convinced. 'You ended up practically living with him – can you understand how that looks?'

'Yes, I can, but there's nothing there. I did love him once, but we were over long before I walked out.' Saying that out loud feels like I've been cleansed. I can finally admit what I've been unable to: that Aiden and I never stood a chance. 'What reason would I have to lie to you about that now? Like I said, I'm not here to try and worm my way back into your life. I only want to find my daughter. Please, trust me, Jamie, like I have to trust you. There's nobody else I can talk to about this.'

'What about that friend who came to your flat that time?' he asks. 'The time you couldn't wait to get me out the door.'

'I'm sorry for that. Sophie was my closest friend before I left Kayla and Aiden. We taught at the same school.'

'Did she know you were leaving?'

'No. I didn't tell a single person. I couldn't. It was like I was sleepwalking through my life.'

'Hmm. That would explain why she seemed so angry with you.'

I'm surprised that Jamie noticed this in the few minutes he was in Sophie's presence. I haven't given him enough credit for the perceptive and intelligent man that he is. Again, I'm filled with sadness that I couldn't be enough for him.

'I got back in touch with her to see if she could help me get in contact with Kayla. Understandably she wasn't happy. I betrayed our friendship by leaving, and she also saw Aiden at his lowest. She and her partner Damien helped to pick up the pieces. I lost more than just my family when I left.'

'Can you talk to her now?' Jamie suggests. 'If you were so close once, surely she'd believe you about what Aiden's doing. Maybe she can help somehow?'

'I don't want to drag Sophie into this, it's not fair on her. When this is over and Kayla is found, I hope Sophie and I will be able to have some sort of friendship. For now, though, I have to leave her alone.' I won't hold out too much hope of this friendship, though – maybe sometimes it's just too late to go back.

In the midst of thinking about this, something occurs to me. 'Hold on, I've had a thought. The one thing I know for sure about Aiden is that he loves Kayla. There's no way, if you're right about everything, that he wouldn't have seen her these last three months. No way. Even if she's with

Nicole. It would devastate her to be away from him, and he wouldn't put her through that. I know that for a fact.'

Jamie frowns. 'Are you sure? It sounds like he can't be trusted. He wouldn't want the police finding out, so he probably wouldn't risk seeing her. What he's doing is a crime, and he won't want to end up in prison.'

'That's just it – the police aren't looking at him, or me. In the beginning they had to make sure we weren't involved, but I know they don't suspect either of us now. This gives Aiden free rein to do whatever he wants and go wherever he likes.' I think about all the late meetings he's had lately, all the urgent times he's been called into work, even though he was meant to take time off. Could Jamie be right?

'That's how I'm going to find her. Aiden will lead me right to her.'

'I don't know about this, Eve. You need to be careful. I don't like the sound of it.'

'All I need to do is get a photo or video of him meeting up with Kayla or Nicole. He'll never even know I'm there. That should be enough to convince the police he's been lying to them. They'll do the rest.'

'Okay,' Jamie says. 'I can see I'm not going to talk you out of this, am I?'

'Not when this involves getting my daughter back.'

He stares at me for a long time. 'It's so hard to work you out,' he says eventually. 'Part of me thinks I should still hate you for lying to me, but then part of me believes you must have had good reason because you just don't deliberately hurt people. That's not who you are.'

I should tell Jamie everything, even though we are no longer together, and finally rid myself of what's been burning inside me all this time, eating away at me and destroying me piece by tiny piece. If anyone would understand, it's him. As always though, just thinking about talking causes me to shut down.

'Thanks for saying that,' I say. 'It means a lot to me.' Even though we're no longer together, I somehow feel comfortable with Jamie, right now in this moment, more than I ever did before. It's the lies which form the barrier.

'Will you let me do it?' Jamie asks as I stand up to leave.

'Do what?'

'Keep an eye on Aiden. Maybe I can follow him? He doesn't know me, does he? It might be safer.'

It takes less than a second for me to consider this. ‘Thanks, but I need to do this by myself. I’m the one who set this in motion when I left those years ago, so I’m the one who needs to put this right. For my daughter.’ And I won’t drag Jamie into my mess.

‘At least keep me updated then. Every day.’

I promise to do this and, just as we say goodbye and I step outside the pub, my phone beeps. It’s a text from Aiden.

Where are you? I just got home and you’re not here. Worried about you.

His words should fill me with fear, but all they do is fuel my determination.

I’m going to find out the truth.

And get my daughter back.

FORTY-FOUR

Now

For three days Aiden doesn't leave the house. It's as if he knows that I'm suspicious of him – even though my rational brain tells me this is impossible. Even if he somehow found out I'd gone to Jamie's a few days ago, he could only assume that I might still have feelings for him, not that we were piecing together what might have happened to Kayla.

'I can't face work,' Aiden tells me. 'I think it's all finally caught up with me and I need a break. I want to spend time with you. You don't have to go back to your flat for a while, do you? Being with you makes me feel closer to Kayla.'

As I listen to him – these words that would ordinarily melt my heart – I wonder if it's possible that he became such an accomplished liar. I tell him I don't need to go home. This is exactly where I need to be.

With each passing hour I begin to feel claustrophobic, a prisoner who can't escape even though the door is wide open. Does Aiden want it this way? Is he enjoying it? If he does know where Kayla is then inflicting emotional pain on me must be his endgame, to get me back for leaving him. Despite how heinous this makes him, I can't believe that he would hurt me physically, even though the more I think about it, the more I wonder if he wants me out of the way somehow. There can be no other reason he's doing this. He could have just disappeared with Nicole and Kayla, so why else would he stay to put on this sinister show? I am a threat to his life with Nicole and Kayla; he knows that if I took this to court, I would have every right to see my daughter. He had every chance for us to work together, yet ultimately he didn't want me to spend even a second with Kayla.

Paranoia sets in. What if having me out of the way is his only option?

In the harsh light of day, it's easy to convince myself this is nonsense – that of course Aiden would never hurt anyone. I try to cling on to this thought. He is just a father desperate for his daughter back, a man who still loves the mother of his child.

On the fourth day, I grow increasingly uncomfortable, until respite finally comes. The police need Aiden to come down to the station to check some

CCTV footage, to rule out a possible sighting of Nicole. Since Kayla's disappearance was on the local news, there have been plenty of false alarms, and I have no doubt that this is yet another one. It will get Aiden out of the house for a couple of hours, though, and that's exactly what I need.

Renting a car was Jamie's idea. He would have lent me his, but we can't take the chance that Nicole saw it outside his flat when she turned up on his doorstep. This is the safest way for me to follow Aiden, and as soon as he announces that he's going somewhere, I will be right behind him.

At the rental place, I pick a black Ford Focus, a popular car that shouldn't attract attention. It's very different to drive than my Peugeot, so I drive around for a while, making sure I'm completely comfortable with it, and that Aiden is still at work, before I park it on our road.

'How did it go?' I ask when Aiden gets home around half an hour after me.

He peels off his coat. 'It wasn't her,' he says. 'I really had my hopes up this time, but no – the woman on camera definitely wasn't Nicole. Too tall. I suppose I can see why they thought it was her. She looked about the same build, but it definitely wasn't.'

I hand him a glass of wine and tell him not to be disheartened. 'We'll find her. I have no doubt in my mind about that.'

Oblivious to what I really mean, Aiden pulls me towards him and buries his head in my hair, breathing in my scent. I force myself to hold him when what I really want to do is shove him away, demand the truth.

'Will you stay with us once we find her?' he whispers. 'That's what you want, isn't it? For us all to be together?'

'That's what I want.' I have no trouble getting the words out because I'm determined to win this battle.

But when he pulls back, his mouth searching for mine, it's a struggle to react. Do this for Kayla, I tell myself, but after only a couple of seconds I pull away, faking a cough. 'Sorry,' I say. 'Think I need some water.'

He stares at me, and for a moment I feel as though he can see into my mind. 'Thanks for the wine but I'll have to have it later. Work called when I was at the police station. They need me to go in for a couple of hours.'

Is he telling the truth? I can't help but question him. 'I thought you were having a break?'

'I am. I will. This is important though. Nobody else can do it.'

'Okay,' I say.

Here we go. This is it.

Following Aiden as he drives, I start to believe that he *is* actually going to work. He's heading in the direction of Chiswick, and I envisage myself turning back around, admonishing myself for thinking the worst of him. Then everything changes when he makes a right turn and heads in the opposite direction from his office.

I continue at a safe distance, even though he won't know this car. I've got my hair tied up and sunglasses on, just in case he does notice someone trailing him.

It's over half an hour before he pulls into a road and begins to slow down. My heart hammers in my chest. Is Kayla only metres away from me? Something occurs to me, erasing any hope: unless he takes Kayla out somewhere, it will be impossible to get a photo of the two of them together. And I will need evidence. It's the middle of the day, so there's no way I can sneak up to any windows without being seen.

Aiden stops outside one of the houses and reverses into a parking space out front. There's no off-street parking on this road, so I need to keep driving past, otherwise he'll notice me, yet if I carry on, I'll lose sight of where he's going. There's no guarantee he's heading into the house he's parked outside.

Fate is with me today, and by the time I've doubled back, he is knocking on the dark red door of the house I assumed it would be. I've driven past before I can see who lets him in, or if he has his own keys, but this is progress. Proof that I'm not just being paranoid.

Parking across the road, further down but close enough to see when Aiden leaves, I slide down in my seat and call Jamie.

‘I followed him,’ I say. ‘Right now I’m parked outside a house in Hayes, and Aiden’s just gone inside. He told me he was going to work.’

‘That was quick,’ Jamie says. ‘I was thinking this could go on for weeks. Months even.’

These last few days have felt anything but quick for me. ‘What if Kayla’s in there, Jamie?’

He must sense the adrenalin coursing through me. ‘Okay, just slow down, though. Let’s think. Are you sure there’s nothing else he could be doing? Visiting friends or something?’

‘He would have said. If this was all innocent then he wouldn’t have told me he was going to work.’

‘True. It doesn’t look good.’

‘I need evidence that I can take to the police. A photo of him with Nicole or Kayla.’

‘How are you going to do that without being seen? It’s the middle of the day.’

‘I know. And Aiden or Nicole might not walk out with Kayla.’

‘Just call the police,’ Jamie says. ‘If Kayla is in there then they’ll soon find her.’

‘I need to be sure before I go to them. Just in case we’re wrong. What if he’s seeing some woman and doesn’t want me to know? I can’t mess this up, Jamie. I’ve got one chance to get this right.’

‘Hmm. Have you thought about what will happen after? With Kayla, I mean. You can’t just announce that you’re her mum and expect she’ll be allowed to live with you.’

His words sting, but he’s speaking the truth. ‘I haven’t worked it all out. I know it won’t be easy, but there’ll be a way. There’s no way Aiden and Nicole are fit to be her carers after this.’

‘True, but you’ll have a lot of bureaucracy to deal with. Just don’t get your hopes up.’

Jamie doesn’t need to tell me this; I know that if Aiden has any part in Kayla’s disappearance then it doesn’t just erase my past, or guarantee that my future with Kayla will be without extreme challenges. ‘I won’t. I just want her back, Jamie. Even if I’m not the one she’ll live with for now.’

‘It’s funny,’ Jamie says. ‘I feel like I’ve learned more about you in the last few days than I did the whole time we were together. All it takes is honesty, right?’

I fight back a tear that tries to break free.

It's over two hours before Aiden emerges. Alone. From this distance it's impossible to read his expression. As I've assumed, there will be no chance to get a photo – not even one from this distance.

He's walking briskly to his car, and I need to get out of here and beat him home before he asks questions about where I've been. Rush hour traffic will make this a tough game to win, especially as Aiden will know these roads and any shortcuts better than I do, but I stick to the same route Aiden used to get here, assuming that is the quickest way.

Once again, fate is rooting for me today and I make it home before Aiden. I hunt through the fridge to see if there's anything I can cobble together for dinner, anything to make it look like I've been busy at home. Lentils, chopped tomatoes and spaghetti are all I can find that can be thrown together; it will taste bland without anything to flavour it, but it's the best I can do. One thing for sure is that Aiden won't protest about it; he's still hardly eating at home under the pretence of worrying about Kayla. I imagine he fills himself up when he's away from the house.

When Aiden still isn't home by the time the food is nearly ready, I begin to think I left him too early. What if that house was nothing to do with Kayla, and he's gone straight to her afterwards? Another house, somewhere else. I'm about to throw the food in the bin and go back to Hayes when I hear the front door open, and Aiden calling to me.

'Hey,' he says, walking into the kitchen. 'That smells good. What is it?'

'A veggie spaghetti thing,' I say, trying to scrutinise his tone, analyse each word he speaks.

'How did you know I'd be back now?'

An oversight. I need to be more careful. 'I didn't. I was going to just have mine and keep yours warm.'

He eyes the food, and any second now he will tell me that spaghetti can't be kept warm or reheated, that you have to eat it straightaway.

'Thanks,' he says.

'How was work?'

'Tough day, actually. Too many meetings. I was stuck in the office all day and didn't even have time for a lunch break.'

He delivers his lie flawlessly, moving across to me and leaning in to kiss me. I turn my head so he catches no more than my cheek. 'I'm actually feeling quite hungry,' he continues. 'I'd forgotten what having an appetite feels like.'

'Don't beat yourself up,' I say. 'Marianne explained that it's completely normal to do everyday things, even to enjoy doing them. It doesn't mean we don't love and miss Kayla.'

'You always know what to say,' he says. 'I'd forgotten that about you. Forgotten how strong you are.'

I have no idea what he's playing at by saying this. Is it all just part of the game to make me feel secure with him? To have me believe that he loves me? 'Strong enough that I left?' I ask, baiting him. He will have no idea what it took for me to walk out of the door that night, and to set up my life of isolation.

'Let's not talk about the past,' he says. 'Focus on now, that's all that matters. They will find her, Eve, I'm convinced of it. There are only so many places Nicole will be able to hide.'

I have to hand it to Aiden, if I didn't know the truth I would fall for every word he says. Telling me that the past no longer matters would be all I'd have needed to hear. Validation. Except that it could never have been enough, not when the past is really *all* that matters. Especially now.

'Are you going into work tomorrow?' I ask Aiden as we eat dinner. The food hasn't turned out too badly after I added far too much salt and pepper.

'Yeah, I'll have to. There's only so much time I can take off. I know I said I needed a break, but being in the office today showed me how much I'll get behind if I don't go in. I'm sorry, we'll still have plenty of time together, though, won't we?'

All I can manage is a nod, a smile that dies as soon as he looks away.

I will follow you tomorrow. Make sure that really is where you're going, and then I've got somewhere of my own to visit.

'I think I'll get in touch with the counsellor Marianne recommended. Talk it all through. Are you planning to see her, too?'

Aiden smiles. 'They've arranged for me to see someone at work. It will be easier for me to do it in my lunch break.'

Of course you will. That way I will have no idea that you're not actually going to anyone.

'Good. We both need to stay strong for Kayla, don't we?'

‘Like I said, Eve, that’s what you are.’ There’s darkness in his tone when he says this, and I’m sure it’s not just me reading too much into every word. That can’t be the case when every word he produces must be a lie.

I offer to clear away after dinner, but Aiden tells me to leave it. ‘Why don’t we have an early night?’ he says.

My body freezes; I know exactly what he means, and I’m running out of excuses for keeping my distance. ‘My period’s just started,’ I blurt out, even though it’s not due for another week. Even when we were married, Aiden had no clue about where I was in my cycle; it was always up to me to tell him when we needed to try each month. I only hope he remains oblivious now.

‘Okay, no problem,’ he says. ‘It was just what you said earlier that got me thinking. About Marianne saying it’s okay for us to still enjoy things. Don’t worry, though, we’ve got plenty of time, haven’t we?’

I nod and smile, try to contain my nausea.

Aiden starts clearing up while I head upstairs and get ready for bed. When I slide under the covers, I listen to the sounds of him clanging around downstairs.

The next thing I know is that the house is silent except for Aiden’s light breathing somewhere close by. He’s standing by the door watching me; I can feel it without opening my eyes.

FORTY-FIVE

Now

Morning can't come quickly enough, and I wait for Aiden to leave for work, listening to the sound of him showering and brushing his teeth. Domestic noises that hint at normality, the mundane even. But underlying that is the menacing sense of time running out. One thing last night has taught me is that I can't keep up this act for much longer, not without sacrificing the core of my being. And I will never do that.

I'd closed my eyes while he stood at the door, feigning sleep as I'd done before, but this time waiting to hear his footsteps coming towards me. That would have been it – I would have fought with every fibre within me, even though that would have signalled the end of whatever sick game this is he's playing.

If it had ended there and then, at least I would have come to know what he's planning to do, his hand forced unexpectedly. But here I am, ready to fight another day.

And now, once again, I pretend to be asleep when he pokes his head around the door to say goodbye. 'See you later,' he whispers, the thoughtful act making me shudder.

As soon as I hear the front door shut, I jump up, already fully dressed and ready to go. I can't lose sight of him; I need to know whether he really is going to work. When I knock on that door, it's Nicole I want to deal with, not Aiden, not yet.

Surprisingly, Aiden is telling the truth this time, but I park and wait until I see him walking into his office building, just to make sure.

Commuter traffic slows my journey considerably, so it takes almost an hour to get to the house in Hayes. Now that I don't have to worry about Aiden spotting me, I can pause to take in every detail of it. It's similar to Aiden's

and looks like an innocuous family home, not the kind of place that harbours an abducted child.

As I'm about to get out of the car, Jamie texts to ask how it's going. I tell him that I'm prepared to face Nicole, but inside I wonder if this is true. I don't know how she's going to react to seeing me. Will she become violent? Surely not with Kayla in the house. All I have to do is keep her talking, though, and with my phone inside my pocket be ready to dial 999.

I repeat this plan in my mind as I head to the front door, my head held high. I'm not the one in the wrong this time; I have every right to hunt for my daughter.

Outside the house, the enormity of what I'm about to face hits me. I don't know what Nicole's capable of – or Aiden. Stifling my fear, I keep my focus on Kayla.

My heavy knock on the door seems to reverberate around the quiet street. Seconds tick by and nothing happens, until a shadow appears through the mottled glass panel. I draw in a deep breath.

'What are *you* doing here?'

My eyes take too long to tell my brain who I'm staring at; none of this makes sense.

'Well, say something! What are you doing here?'

Marie. Aiden's mother. Not Nicole. What is *she* doing here?

Somehow amidst the fug of scenarios my mind is conjuring up, I manage to speak. 'Where's Kayla? I want to see my daughter. Now.'

Marie frowns. 'What's going on? Why are you asking us about Kayla? How could we possibly know where she is? Are you...?' She turns around and shouts into the house. 'Pete? Eve's here and she's asking about Kayla. I think she might be having... an episode or something?'

Hearing her speak about me like this causes me to become alert. 'Marie, I'm completely fine, I just want to know where my daughter is.'

Pete hurries to the door and stands beside his wife. My parents-in-law. They still are, whether any of us likes it or not. 'Maybe you'd better come in,' he says, gently nudging Marie aside.

I don't hesitate to go inside, despite the fact that I already know Kayla isn't here. They wouldn't be letting me in if she was. Following Pete into the lounge, I'm struck by how similar this place feels to the home they had in Scotland. The layout of the furniture is identical, and I recognise many of the ornaments and paintings hanging on the walls.

‘When did you move from Edinburgh?’ There are so many questions I need answering and this seems like the best starting place. I don’t know which one of them I’m addressing. Either. Both. It doesn’t matter.

Pete glances at Marie before speaking. ‘Around a year ago. We wanted to be closer to Aiden and Kayla. We would have come sooner but it took us a long time to sell our house.’

Aiden never mentioned this. Neither did Sophie, and she must have known they’d moved back here. I even remember her mentioning them. It’s not surprising that Aiden has lied, but why would Sophie? I don’t believe she knows anything about Kayla’s disappearance; I’ve got to have faith that not everyone is rotten to the core.

‘Maybe you should sit down, you look a bit pale,’ Marie says, and again I catch a glance passing between the two of them. ‘Pete, can you get her some water? She doesn’t look good.’

I came here prepared to find my daughter, and now I’m confronted with this. I have no idea what to make of anything, no idea where to start.

When Pete hurries off to the kitchen, Marie turns back to me. ‘You’re shocked that Aiden didn’t tell you about us moving back, aren’t you? Well, you can’t blame him. We told him we wanted nothing to do with you. Not after what you did to your little girl. To *our* Kayla.’

Nothing Marie says makes anything clearer. ‘Did you know I was back?’

She nods. ‘Aiden told us everything. We even know you’ve been spending a lot of time together since Kayla was taken, and I’m going to be blunt – I advised Aiden against it. It’s obvious Nicole took Kayla and ran because she was scared of losing the little girl she’s brought up since she was a baby. In a way, you forced her hand by turning up like that. She probably thought you were after Aiden too, and let’s face it, that’s exactly what it looks like now.’ She finally pauses for breath.

Part of me understands Marie’s resentment. Aiden was neglected by his birth mother, so it’s no wonder she’s trying to picture things from Nicole’s perspective. Still, I must defend myself because I am nothing like the woman who Aiden was taken away from. ‘That’s not how it happened, Marie. And I was never trying to take Kayla away from either of them. I just wanted my daughter back in my life, however that was possible. Don’t I have that right? I’m her *mother*.’

Marie shakes her head. ‘And Aiden’s her father. But now look what’s happened. Even Aiden doesn’t have her. This is all your fault, Eve. You

should never have come back.’ There are tears in her eyes now, convincing me that she doesn’t know where Kayla is. Aiden must have kept it from them too, probably assuming they would never accept him doing this. No matter how much they despise me, it would go against everything they believe in morally.

‘I’m sorry I hurt you all,’ I say, handing Marie a tissue from the pack in my pocket.

She takes it and dabs her eyes. ‘Do you know what this did to Aiden? You walking away from your baby, just like his birth mother did to him! Twice! How could you do that?’

‘Wait, what do you mean twice?’

‘You know what I mean. That heartless woman ripped our boy to shreds again. And the second time he was old enough to be totally scarred by it.’

Although I have no idea what Marie is talking about, I need her to believe I do, so that she’ll keep talking. ‘I know it was awful—’

‘Eight years old! And he was so excited to meet her. We went through so much just to arrange it all, and that evil woman told him she didn’t want anything to do with him, and that he should stop thinking of her as a mum because he meant nothing to her.’ Marie shakes her head, her face now red with anger. ‘I mean, she could have just ignored our requests for a meeting; she didn’t have to say all that stuff to him. And that’s not even all of it, is it? I can’t even bring myself to repeat what else she said before the social worker dragged her away. It took years of counselling for Aiden to come to terms with it all.’

I’m stunned into silence. Aiden has never told me any of this, and he’s never shown anything but a healthy attitude towards his adoption and what led up to it. He always said he’d been so young that he never knew any different.

‘So how you could do that to your own daughter, which amounts to the same kind of thing, I don’t know,’ Marie is saying. She pauses. ‘Aiden said you had postnatal depression?’

‘Yes. I didn’t really know it at the time but I... wasn’t in my right mind.’

‘You could have talked to us, Eve. To me. I understand how hard it is raising a baby. I know we weren’t there for Aiden’s newborn days but being a parent to a child of any age is a challenge. I could have helped you.’

For a brief moment I forget the man Aiden has become and remember how he was. ‘You coming into his life was the best thing that ever happened

to him,' I tell her.

Marie doesn't thank me for this compliment, perhaps she feels I'm not worthy of issuing one. 'It wasn't easy, though,' she says. 'Nothing worth having ever is.'

Pete returns and hands me a glass of water. Out of politeness I drink some of it, even though I'm not thirsty. He sits down next to me and shakes his head. 'Now why on earth would you think we know where Kayla is? Can you understand how strange that sounds?' His tone is gentle, reminding me how kind the two of them always were to me, how much they welcomed me into their family.

'I followed Aiden here yesterday. I was convinced he was lying to me, telling me he was going to work when he wasn't.'

Marie sighs. 'Yes, dear, he *was* lying to you. Because we insisted on having nothing to do with you. He thought it was easier this way. But why on earth would you think he knows where Kayla is? Did you think she was *here*? That we were actually hiding her?'

Hearing this spoken aloud makes me realise how improbable it sounds. Have I been so desperate to believe I will see Kayla again that my mind has concocted this story about Aiden? But the evidence was there: he smashed the windows of my car, and Nicole had insisted that he'd been at home that whole evening. *Circumstantial at best.*

'Aiden is devastated about Kayla,' Marie adds. 'He's even more broken than when you left, and believe me, that cut him to pieces. He's never been the same since. And now he has to deal with Nicole betraying him, too. He doesn't deserve all this, he's a good man. He's only ever wanted to do right by Kayla.'

'I don't know what to think right now,' I admit. 'It's been a bit of a shock finding out you both live here.'

'And seeing you has taken *us* by surprise too,' Marie says. 'Tell me something, Eve. Do you love our son?'

Not any more. It's impossible. 'I would never hurt Aiden again,' I say. 'I promise you that.'

They both turn to each other again, and I wish there was a way to know what they were thinking.

'Well, you and Aiden have a lot of talking to do,' Marie says. 'When Kayla comes back to us – and I do believe Nicole will do the right thing eventually – there's a lot you'll need to work out.'

‘Yes, I know.’ Then something occurs to me. ‘Look, I have no right to ask this but could you just do something for me? Please don’t tell Aiden I came here. I promise I’ll talk to him myself, but I just need it to come from me.’

Marie turns to Pete and frowns. ‘I don’t know, Eve, so many lies have already been told.’

‘I will talk to him as soon as he gets home from work. All I’m asking is that you don’t call him in the meantime.’

‘We can do that,’ Pete says.

Marie shakes her head. ‘But—’

‘She’s still Kayla’s mum,’ he says. ‘And the two of them have a lot to sort out.’

We all fall silent, and it feels as though for now, at least, there’s nothing left to say. I tell them I need to go, and neither of them object.

In the car I call Jamie and tell him what’s just happened.

‘Well, this is weird. What does it mean?’ he asks.

‘I don’t know. It doesn’t look like Aiden’s hiding Kayla, though. But I can’t be sure about anything any more. I honestly don’t know what to think.’

Jamie falls silent. ‘I don’t like this, Eve. It’s all a bit strange and I’m worried about you.’

‘You don’t need to be,’ I assure him. ‘I’m made of titanium you know!’ I force this joke even though I’m sure neither of us is in the mood for humour.

‘What will you do now then?’ Jamie asks.

‘Go back to Aiden’s. Act like normal. I’d rather go to my flat but I can’t rest until I’m one hundred per cent sure he’s not guilty of anything. Maybe I’ll follow him again tomorrow and see. That’s the only way to know for sure, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah, I suppose you have no choice.’ He sounds just as disappointed as I am.

‘I really thought I’d find her today, Jamie. I feel crushed that I’m no closer.’

‘Don’t give up,’ he says. ‘Eve Martin doesn’t quit, does she?’

When I get back to Aiden's there's no sign of his car. I let myself in with the key that he so readily gave me and dump my bag on the console table. I head to the kitchen, unable to think further than making myself a strong coffee, and when I reach the door my heart almost stops when I see Aiden sitting at the table, staring at me, his arms folded. There's no phone or laptop on the table; it's as if he's been doing nothing but wait for me to walk in.

FORTY-SIX

Now

‘I got back early,’ he says. ‘Where have you been?’

‘I went to Westfield.’ I have no idea why this, of all places, shoots into my head. I’ve never been there, and it’s unlikely Aiden will believe I’ve spent an afternoon shopping.

Aiden nods. ‘Really? Did you get the Tube?’

‘No, I drove, why?’

‘Your car was outside when I got home.’ He says this so calmly, and somehow that just makes it more sinister.

To my relief an excuse pops into my head, as if it’s been there all along, just waiting for the moment to be extracted. ‘My car’s been playing up so I hired one. I need to be able to get around easily. Continue looking for Kayla.’

There’s no way he’ll believe this; all of a sudden it feels as though this game of cat and mouse has tipped heavily in his favour.

‘You didn’t mention it.’

‘I know... I just—’

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ he says. ‘I didn’t mean to sound like I don’t trust you. I do, you know. Even after everything. It’s not fair of me to do that to you, though. I’ll really try to work on that, I promise.’

Relief. Everything might be okay. He just has trouble believing I won’t leave again.

‘What will you do tonight?’ he asks.

Planning what I will do next, how I can find Kayla now that I’m not sure Aiden is responsible for her disappearance. ‘Not much,’ I say. ‘A coffee. Bath. Try to read a book. Why?’

‘Will you come somewhere with me? There’s something I want to show you.’

‘What is it?’

He smiles. ‘I can’t tell you yet. That would ruin the surprise, wouldn’t it? Please, just trust me.’

Doesn't Aiden remember that I never liked surprises? I need to know what I'm in for, every step of the way. His face is full of excitement, though, like a child who can't wait to show you something they've made especially for you, that they're sure you will love. 'Okay. Do I need to get ready or anything?'

'No, you're fine as you are. Come on, we'd better go now before the traffic gets any worse.'

We crawl through London, most of the time at a standstill because, despite our best efforts to leave the house immediately, it took over half an hour to get in the car. Marianne had called Aiden just as we were leaving, and I watched him closely as he spoke, trying to analyse every twitch of his facial muscles, the cadence of his words, trying to find something to latch onto that would help me know.

But it was no longer there – that confidence I felt that I had it all worked out. Now I was just out to sea – adrift and unsure what to make of anything. Aiden had ended the call by telling Marianne he'd see her tomorrow. 'Another possible sighting,' he'd explained.

This is another reason to believe I'm wrong about Aiden; Marianne has spent enough time with him, surely she would suspect something if there was anything there at all. She would know if he was lying, wouldn't she?

'You're not going to tell me where we're going, are you?' I ask.

'I could,' he says. 'I really want it to be a surprise, though. Is that okay? I know you don't like surprises but can you just humour me?'

There's something different about Aiden's mood tonight; it's lighter, almost peaceful. All the tension seems to have slipped away. 'Something's changed,' I say, because I've never been one for keeping quiet about things that seem important. 'Did Marianne say something?'

'Actually, yes. She was really optimistic this time. Told me there's a good chance this eye witness really did see Nicole. I'm daring to believe it was her. Does that make me a fool?'

'No,' I say. 'But how come she didn't want to see us now? Surely we need to follow up on this lead as soon as possible?'

'She did want to see me tonight. But I told her we had to do something important first.'

There is no way Aiden wouldn't rush there immediately. Unless of course he already knows where Nicole and Kayla are. Have I made a terrible mistake by getting into this car? There's a chance I was right all along, and if so, now I've played right into Aiden's hands. I was blinded by Marie and Pete, unable to believe that they have any part in all of this, but what if they do? They could have told Aiden I'd been at the house.

I try to keep my voice steady. 'I didn't hear you saying that to her.'

'You went to the bathroom, remember? I must have said it then.'

'That's true,' I agree. I will play along with this, just as I did before, and let Aiden think I'm oblivious, at least until I can work out what to do.

Staring out of the car window, I try to control my shaking limbs. I turn up the radio, hoping the club music they've just started playing will somehow ease my nerves. We're on the North Circular now, moving faster, the road ahead clear because rush hour passed long ago. What am I heading towards? I consider quickly unbuckling my seat belt, throwing open the door and jumping out, but we're in the middle lane and there's no way I would come away without broken bones, or worse. Besides, this might be my chance to find out the truth, no matter what the cost to me.

'Do you remember when we first got married?' I ask, hoping that by bringing alive our shared story Aiden will think twice about whatever he's got planned. 'And we moved into our house in the same week? We sat on the floor with an Indian takeaway and couldn't believe we had our own place. We had barely any furniture. Paper plates and cups.' I chuckle. 'That night was one of the most special moments of my life.' This is no lie; it's one of the last times I remember feeling truly at peace with the world, that everything was as perfect as it was possible to be.

Aiden keeps his eyes fixed on the road but nods. 'Mine too. It feels like it was a calm before the storm, doesn't it? I mean with all the miscarriages.'

That seems like a lifetime ago, as if it's a story belonging to someone else, because ultimately Kayla came along far too easily. 'Yes,' I say, wondering where this is going. Every word Aiden speaks feels rigidly rehearsed, designed to evoke a specific reaction. Pain?

'Funny that you couldn't enjoy Kayla then. After going through all that heartache to finally hold her in your arms. You know, that's what I've never truly understood. It's not as if she was a mistake, was it? We'd tried for years to have her.'

It's coming now. Aiden's finally giving himself away. I haven't expected him to drop the pretence so quickly, especially when we're still driving. 'It's not as simple as that,' I say. 'Postnatal depression can affect any woman, regardless of their journey to motherhood.'

'You sound like a self-help book,' he says. 'Is that what you tell yourself to justify what you did?'

I hold my ground. 'No. I don't try to justify it. I try to make amends for it.'

He snorts. 'And is following people around, spying on them, how you do that?' He turns to me briefly. 'Oh, don't look so surprised. Did you think my parents wouldn't tell me you paid them a visit? For someone so intelligent, you really have shown some stupidity. Countless times.'

'Finally, we can stop pretending,' I say. 'I'm actually relieved, Aiden, because I'm tired of your twisted mind games.'

He throws his head back. 'Games? This is no game, Eve. Unfortunately, this is real life, and you're just going to have to deal with it.'

I keep my eyes fixed on the road, my hands feeling for my seat belt. 'Tell me where you're taking me,' I demand, even though I already know he won't. This is part of the torture, letting my mind imagine all kinds of terrible scenarios.

'I'm actually doing you a favour,' he says, turning off the North Circular onto the M1. 'I'm going to give you the answer you've been looking for.'

Aiden falls silent after this, refusing to elaborate when I ask him what he means. Eventually I give up; all I can do now is wait for the right moment. I've tried to keep track of the route Aiden has taken so far, but all I can determine is that we're now far from London, far from anything familiar.

'I know you won't hurt me,' I say, even though I know nothing of the sort. 'Physically, I mean. Why would you risk going to prison when you've got a daughter to look after? That's your plan, isn't it? To scare me off so I leave you and Nicole alone to bring up Kayla.'

He snickers. 'You think you've got it all worked out, don't you?'

'I'm pretty sure I have now, yes.'

'Well, I have to warn you against assuming anything in life. It just doesn't get you anywhere. Look at me, I'm living proof of that. I assumed I had a loving wife, someone who cared for me and our daughter.'

Now's my chance; I've got to try. I reach into my pocket and feel for my phone, surprised to feel nothing but the fabric of my coat.

‘Looking for this?’ he says, reaching into the side of his door and pulling out my mobile. He winds his window down and tosses it out, as if he’s discarding a piece of chewing gum.

People always talk about how vulnerable and lost they’d feel without their mobiles, but that’s nothing compared to how I feel now, knowing that without my phone I have no way of getting help. Knowing that my life might depend on it. ‘Do what you like to me, Aiden. All that matters is Kayla.’

‘Oh, no, now you’ve ruined my surprise.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I’m taking you to Kayla, of course. But first it’s your turn to answer some of my questions.’

FORTY-SEVEN

Now

We're in dense woodland, miles from the road we took off the motorway. And it's dark now, no street lights to guide us. Several times I shake my head in disbelief. This has got to be some sort of joke because it's too surreal to be anything else. I'm wearing the worst shoes for this type of environment: flat ballet pumps that are now crusted with mud. My feet have begun to blister. Aiden, I realise, is wearing hiking boots. How did I not notice this before? He's only ever in trainers when he's not working.

It sickens me that he's so sure of himself, so confident that I'll follow him that he doesn't even hang by my side, instead striding ahead and insisting I keep up. 'You want to see her, don't you?'

I won't though, I'm sure of that. Whatever we're doing out here, he's not bringing me to see Kayla. This should terrify me, but I feel only numb. I can handle whatever is coming. I will get out of this somehow.

Suddenly Aiden stops, and as I catch up with him he shoves me to the ground. My fall draws blood on my palms, and although I don't feel any pain his action has diminished me. 'This is as far as we go,' he says, hovering over me.

'So, what then? You're going to kill me? I think you've been watching too many Mafia films.'

He laughs then, his sinister chortle echoing around the trees. 'Why would I want to kill you? That wouldn't be a punishment, would it? No, you need to suffer much more than that. And there's only one thing I could think of that would hurt you above anything else.'

'What are you talking about?' But somehow, I already know. It's something I can't even begin to comprehend, but it all makes a hideous kind of sense now. Perhaps I even knew it the second he said he was bringing me to Kayla.

I just didn't want to believe it.

'Kayla!' I scream. 'You wouldn't! She's your daughter!' I try to jump up, but Aiden shoves me back down with his foot, the thud of pain winding me.

He points to a mound of fresh earth a few metres away, his mouth twisted into an evil snarl. 'But she's not, though, is she, Eve? And I think it's about time you told me the truth.'

FORTY-EIGHT

Before Kayla

It's taken me by surprise how much I've come to enjoy tutoring Justin Foley. I still stand by the fact that he doesn't need extra help, that he's one of those kids who could get the highest grades with no revision whatsoever. But if his father wants to splash out on these sessions, and Justin actually wants them, who am I to argue?

Besides, it's just another thing to take me away from having to face Aiden after I told him I didn't think I could go through with adoption. *At this time*, I'd said, because I didn't want to rule anything out for the future. After all, how do any of us know how we're going to feel about something given a bit of time? Things alter. People change.

Case in point: Alex Foley. Over the last few weeks, we've taken to chatting for a while after I tutor Justin, and he's gone up in my estimation. He somehow seems more human. Less frustrating. There's something about being in a person's home that can make you warm to them and see a side of them you can't glimpse from short interactions. In fact, I've learned things about him that shed light on his overbearing manner, almost make it understandable.

He's the head of a giant hedge fund company, and with that title comes huge responsibility for people's money, and for his employers. As well as this, he's a single father, bringing up Justin alone since his ex-wife moved to Paris for work. 'She does visit Justin whenever she can,' he explained, 'but it means all the day-to-day care is down to me. I won't get help, though. I'm determined to raise my son myself.' What's not to admire about that?

This evening, Justin seems distracted, his eyes darting to the huge Roman numeral clock on the kitchen wall every couple of minutes. I call it a kitchen but this room – which our whole house could fit inside – is more of an *everything* room. It has a sofa and TV, a dining table, and everything most people have spread throughout their homes. Considering Alex Foley's job, though, this place isn't too extravagant. 'You wouldn't believe this, but I don't really care about money,' he'd told me the first time I came here.

‘They’re so bloody right when they say it doesn’t necessarily bring you happiness.’

‘Justin, are you okay?’ I ask. It’s not like him to be so unfocused.

‘Yeah, miss. It’s just... well, I’m meeting this girl this evening. And I’m a bit nervous.’

I can’t help but smile. ‘What exactly is making you nervous?’

‘Because she’s beautiful, miss. Everyone’s after her and I’m lucky she even looked at me. D’you know how many followers she’s got on Instagram?’

Although I’m tempted, now is not the time to preach to him about the hazards of social media. Besides, for a sixteen-year-old, Justin seems to have his head firmly screwed on, something I believe is partly down to his dad.

‘She’s lucky too,’ I say. ‘Don’t forget that.’ And I mean it. It’s easy to see that Justin is growing into a handsome young man, but he’s also a decent human being. He’s never in any trouble at school, and he’s polite and friendly to everyone. A credit to his dad, even if I didn’t want to acknowledge that in the beginning.

Justin beams, his cheeks turning puce. ‘Thanks, miss.’

‘I’ll tell you what – how about we finish up now? You’ve worked hard for weeks, so I don’t think losing ten minutes will make any difference. You can go and get ready.’

‘Thanks, miss.’ He gathers up his things and strides out of the room. It’s then that I notice Alex hovering in the doorway. He pats Justin on the shoulder then heads over to me.

‘We really appreciate all you’re doing,’ he says. ‘You’re really good with the students. You seem to care about them as people, not just as learners, if that makes any sense?’

‘Teaching’s not the easiest job in the world, so I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t genuinely care.’

‘I’m guessing a lot of people do it for other reasons though. Maybe they just want the long holidays.’

‘No one I’ve ever met went into it for that reason.’

Alex chuckles. ‘That’s what’s refreshing about you, Eve. You’re not afraid to disagree with me. To tell it like it is. Most people I’m around go along with whatever I say. I could be arguing that the earth is flat and they’ll jump to agree.’

‘Well, some people really do believe it *is* flat,’ I say, packing up my pencil case.

Again, he laughs, and I’m surprised to find it pleases me that he finds me funny.

‘Will you stay and have coffee?’ he asks. ‘Seeing as you’ve finished a bit early?’

Although I’m flattered by his invitation and pleased that he wants to spend time talking to me, I should get home to Aiden. I can’t keep avoiding him; we need to address our future, and the fact that it will probably be a childless one.

‘Maybe another time?’ I offer. Weeks ago, I would have given a simple *no thank you*, and once again I’m caught off guard by the fact that I actually want to spend time talking to Alex.

‘Please?’ he asks. ‘I find it very hard to de-stress after work, and it’s nice to be able to chat with someone. I’ll even stretch to some biscuits. How does that sound? Come on, surely I can tempt you with a Bourbon?’

Even though I should stand firm with my offer to postpone, I find myself saying yes. Another half hour can’t hurt, and Aiden will still be at work for a few hours at least.

‘Great,’ Alex says. ‘Let me get that coffee on.’

I’m far too relaxed here, sitting on the sofa with my legs tucked under me, as if I’m at Sophie’s rather than the father of one of my students. Is it possible that I’ve come to think of Alex as a friend without realising it?

‘So, who is Eve Conway?’ he asks, looking at me intently.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Teachers always seem like people who give up their whole lives for their calling. I just wondered who you are beyond what you do. There’s so much more to you, isn’t there?’

Is there more to me? All I feel like is a woman who keeps losing babies. A woman who will end up childless. What more is there to me?

‘I like your question,’ I say. ‘And I wish I had a good answer for it. I’m just not sure I even know who I am beyond being a teacher.’

‘Oh, come on,’ he says. ‘You’re a beautiful young woman – there’s got to be so much more to you. In fact, I’m willing to bet there is, and you’ve

probably worked out by now that I'm the type of man who only bets on things I can win.'

But I've stopped listening after he called me beautiful. It was thrown into the statement so casually, as if it was an indisputable fact, not just someone's opinion. Why does this warm my insides? I'm a married woman with a husband who loves her – a compliment from another man shouldn't make me feel this way. I need to fight back against these pointless and dangerous feelings. Show him I'm far from perfect.

'I'll tell you who I am,' I say. 'I'm a woman who can't have a baby. There you go, that's me.'

I've shocked him. He doesn't know what to say. 'Oh, I—'

'Even if I'm lucky enough to fall pregnant, I always miscarry, and there's no point in doing IVF because even if it works, I'll probably still lose the baby. I don't think I could put myself through that again. I think I'm done with it. I don't know, though. It's all up in the air.' The words spill from my mouth in a hurry, and I realise I've been desperate to say them out loud.

Alex grabs my hand. 'Okay. Well, firstly I think that's extremely brave of you to talk about. And secondly, I think you could do with a drink.'

The reason I keep talking is because Alex is listening. Really listening. We're alone in the house now; Justin has left to meet his girlfriend, and I'm sharing thoughts I've never before dared to give voice to.

'But you love your husband, and it sounds like he loves you. Why do you feel you can't be honest about adoption?' Alex asks.

'Because it's almost like a smack in the face for him. He was adopted, so what does it say when his own wife won't even consider it?'

'He'll understand.'

Alex can't know this, yet he speaks with such authority. I start to laugh.

'What's so funny?'

'Are you always so self-assured?'

'I have to be. I wouldn't be where I am today without having confidence. I'm not arrogant, though. Please don't think that.'

'I don't.' I laugh again. 'I did find you annoying to begin with, though.'

His eyes widen. 'Annoying? Not sure I've ever been called that before. But I can see why. I did harass you a bit about tutoring Justin, didn't I?'

‘Just a bit.’

‘I’m sorry. If you don’t ask, you don’t get, though.’

What must it be like to be Alex Foley? To assume that everything will always go your way. I ask him this.

‘How else do you get what you want? Life’s too short to sit by and wait for things to happen. You have to grab every opportunity you can. Grab it by the balls!’

I burst into laughter, and it feels so good. It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to do this. ‘Thanks for making me laugh,’ I say.

Alex smiles. ‘I aim to please,’ he says. ‘Admit it, I’ve taken your mind off everything, haven’t I?’

‘Yes. Somehow, weirdly, you have.’

He gets up from the chair he’s sitting on and walks across to me, sitting beside me on the sofa. Then he is leaning forward, pushing my hair back from my face and whispering into my ear that I’m beautiful.

I jolt backwards. ‘I have to go.’ I try to stand but he gently pushes me backwards, leaning onto me, his weight against me, his mouth finding mine.

‘No,’ I say, but maybe it’s not loud enough because he’s not stopping. ‘No!’ Louder this time, but he’s still not stopping, and instead he’s lifting my skirt, pulling down my tights, his hands creeping up my legs. I freeze. Did I make him think I wanted this? What have I done?

‘Get off me, Alex, just stop.’ I lash out, thump his back, kick my legs as hard as I can, but he doesn’t say a word as he treats my body as if it belongs to him, as if he can do what he likes, as if I want him to.

I scream, but it doesn’t sound loud enough; it’s not enough to stop him. I can feel him against me now, and then he’s shoving himself inside me, ignoring my screams, perhaps even enjoying them.

Through a waterfall of tears, I bite down on his shoulder as hard as I can, taste his salty skin, try to inflict enough pain on him to make him stop, but it doesn’t work. There is nothing I can do, no way to slip from under his weight. I am powerless.

My whole body freezes and I am forced to endure this for as long as Alex Foley wants it to last.

FORTY-NINE

Now

‘No!’ Aiden says, shaking his head. ‘No, you’re lying! You wanted to sleep with him... he didn’t do that to you. You were going there for weeks, pretending to only be tutoring his son, when it was him you really wanted to see. He gave you attention and you enjoyed it! Well, now you’ll get to know what it feels like to lose everything. You snatched my life from me, and the baby that was supposed to be mine. This is what you deserve.’

‘I swear to you, Aiden – that man was a monster and he forced me. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I’ll regret that for the rest of my life,’ I say, my voice catching on the final words.

‘You took all choices away from me, and we were supposed to be in it together. Now I don’t even have a daughter... how can Kayla mean anything to me now?’

I ignore him, glance at the mound of earth. The shallow grave he’s brought me to. ‘What have you done, Aiden? What did you do to Kayla? She’s still your daughter. She’s the little girl you brought up. What have you done to her?’ I’m screaming now, unable to control my tears, my fear.

‘Do you expect me to believe that you got pregnant after one time? One time that this man supposedly forced himself on you?’

But Aiden wavers now, and I can tell he doesn’t believe his own words.

‘Don’t you think that’s something I’ve asked myself over and over? How cruel fate was to make Kayla his and not yours? Do you think I *wanted* this? I would have done anything to change it.’

Aiden believes me, I know he does. He doesn’t want to because of what it means, but he knows that I would never lie about this. ‘I would never cheat on anyone,’ I manage to say, even though I can’t take my eyes off the place I believe Kayla is buried. ‘Aiden, what the fuck have you done?’

He’s slumped to the ground now, pulling at his hair. I rush over to the mound, tearing at the soil with my hands, my screams echoing through the woods. It feels like I’m getting nowhere, each small amount of earth I manage to fling aside hardly making a dent.

Then I hear voices, floating, far away. Or maybe close by. I can't tell. Shouts. And Aiden crying. I ignore it all; I need to get to Kayla.

Arms wrap themselves around me, pull me away. A gentle voice I recognise. A voice I can trust.

'Eve,' Jamie says. 'Eve, you have to stop. It's okay, the police are here. You're safe now.'

I stare at him and he seems ghost-like, blurred through my lens of tears. 'No, no, it's not okay. She's in there.' I point a trembling finger. 'My baby is in there! He's... he's...'

Then two police officers are helping Jamie move me, urging him to keep me away. I turn and see Aiden being escorted to a police car by two other officers, his arms behind his back and handcuffs on his wrists.

And then I am falling into Jamie, my heart shredding into a million pieces.

FIFTY

Now

‘She’s not there,’ Jamie is saying. ‘Eve, listen to me.’ He grabs my shoulders. ‘Kayla isn’t in there!’

I stand up, wriggle out of Jamie’s arms and run towards the scene of crime officers who have dug up the grave that Aiden brought me to. Then Marianne is beside me, confirming what Jamie has said. ‘It’s okay, Eve – Kayla’s not here. There’s nothing here. We know where she is. Aiden’s told us everything.’

‘Please take me to her,’ I beg. ‘I need to see her.’

Marianne nods. ‘Okay, yes, of course we can do that. We’ve got officers going to the location she’s at, but it’s at least a three-hour drive from here, so it will be a while before we can get her back to London. Social services are going with them to pick her up. Come on, let’s get you back. We need to get you checked out at the hospital. Did he hurt you?’

I shake my head. ‘Not really. I’m okay. It was my mind he wanted to hurt.’

Marianne takes my arm and leads me away.

It takes hours to give my statement at the police station to two detectives I’ve never met before. I’m still shaken, even though in the end Kayla wasn’t buried in that pile of earth. For those minutes, Aiden made me believe she was in there, and that I’d lost my daughter. That he had killed her. That will stay with me forever.

As well as this, I also had to tell Aiden the truth about what had happened to me, and how Kayla came to be, and I wasn’t prepared for that either. I was never going to share my story with anyone, but he forced my hand. I’d spent enough time blocking it out, and then dealing with it through counselling, that I thought I’d never have to relive it.

One of the detectives leads me to a room where Marianne is waiting for me. She stands up when I walk in and hands me a cup of water. 'How are you holding up?'

I take the water, even though I've already had two coffees in the interview room. I've been hoping that caffeine is good for shock, but I've never heard that anywhere so most likely it's not true. 'Kayla's okay,' I say, because it doesn't matter right now how I am. My daughter is fine. 'Do you know anything more about where she's been?'

'Aiden's still being interviewed, but from what I can gather so far, he was visiting her in Henley once a week. He'd told her he had to be away for work, so she and Nicole were having a holiday so that they wouldn't miss him. How thoughtful of him, right?' She shakes her head.

'Can I see her?'

'Soon,' Marianne says. 'I'll sort something out, but it's a complicated situation, isn't it? Kayla knows Nicole as her mum. We need input from social services about how to proceed with it, and unfortunately that's not going to happen as quickly as you'll want it to.'

'She won't still live with Nicole and Aiden, though, will she?' I want to add that neither of them is her parent, but the reality is – whether I like it or not – they both have been and nothing can erase that.

'No. Very unlikely. They're facing serious charges. Of course, Aiden's paternity being under question is going to make this even more complex.'

My poor innocent daughter. She doesn't deserve things to be so complicated, such a mess. It would be too easy to blame Alex Foley for what he did to me that night, but Aiden and I have a part to play in this too. I could have been honest with him from the moment it happened, and given him some choices and decisions. We could have made them together.

'Can I ask you a question?' Marianne says. 'Did you know Aiden wasn't Kayla's father?'

I nod, shame creeping through me.

'But how could you be sure?'

'Because I knew my cycle inside and out. And Aiden and I had been a bit distant with each other that month it happened. I was actually relieved I would have a break from taking ovulation and pregnancy tests, from praying my period wouldn't arrive.' I pause to have a sip of water. 'How did Aiden know? I've been trying to work it out but I just can't. I didn't tell a soul. Not even my closest friend.'

‘That we don’t know yet. He hasn’t said. We will ask him, though, because I’m guessing this was the starting point for his hate campaign against you.’

A hate campaign. Why does it feel as if it was so much more than that?

‘Did Aiden say anything about sending me emails? Saying things like he knows I lied? They started months ago, right before I came back for Kayla.’

Marianne scratches her forehead. ‘No. You never mentioned this.’

I explain about the emails. The sense that someone had been in my flat. All of it. ‘If it wasn’t Aiden then I know exactly how he found out about Kayla not being his. Alex Foley. He must have told him.’

‘Did he know you’d got pregnant?’

‘I don’t think so. He used to call all the time and send me messages, but I always ignored him. I couldn’t even bear to read most of them. He was acting like we’d had an affair or something. It was... as if I had to relive the attack again every time I got a message or my phone rang. He had no idea I’d got pregnant as a result of his... his...’

‘Rape,’ Marianne clarifies. ‘That’s exactly what it was, Eve. Even if you chose to be in his house, chose to have a drink with him, even if you’d enjoyed his company. And he will not get away with it.’

I nod.

‘We’ll question Aiden about this. I’ll let you know what he says.’ Marianne hugs me. ‘I think you should go home now and get some rest. Someone will drive you home. Is there anything you need from Aiden’s?’

So many of my clothes and toiletries are there but I shake my head. I don’t want to go to that house, even with a police escort. ‘There’s nothing I can’t do without,’ I say.

She sees me out to reception, where she asks someone to take me home, but then I spot Jamie, sitting in the waiting area, his eyes fixed on his phone.

‘I won’t need a lift,’ I tell Marianne.

She looks towards Jamie and smiles. ‘Good,’ she says. ‘You’ll probably need someone to talk to tonight. I’ll call you in the morning and let you know where we are with everything.’

When he drops me off, Jamie insists on coming in. 'You haven't been at your flat for ages, what if he's been in there? Done something to your things?'

'Well, if he has, it can't be any worse than what he's already done. But, if you really want to, then it would be nice to have some company.'

Inside, I check each room, relieved to find nothing out of place. Then Jamie and I sit together, with only the street light shining through the windows lighting the room. I ask Jamie how he found us in the woods.

He raises his eyebrows. 'Don't you remember me telling you?' he says. 'When we were still there, you asked me what I was doing there and I told you.'

I shake my head. 'I was all over the place. I couldn't seem to focus on anything until they told me that Kayla wasn't there.'

'That's totally understandable. Anyway, after we spoke on the phone I couldn't stop worrying. I didn't trust Aiden, so I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I know you can handle yourself, but I'd texted you and you didn't reply, so I decided to drive past his house, just to make sure everything looked normal. It was pure luck that I got there just as you were driving off with him. I thought you'd seen me because it seemed like you looked straight at me, but I guess you didn't. I followed you both. I know you'd told me you thought you'd got it wrong after all, but I just couldn't believe that. Good job I trusted my instinct.'

I laugh then, because what were the chances of Jamie turning up at that exact moment? A few seconds later and he would never have known where we'd gone. And then what? Only Aiden knows what he was really planning to do to me. And what if I hadn't told him the truth? He would have continued assuming I'd had an affair, his hatred eating him up, making him act in ways maybe he didn't even know he was capable of.

The laughter quickly dies. 'There are some things I need to tell you,' I say.

'Okay,' he says, and then he takes my hand while for the third time that night I recount the horror story that for years I kept locked away.

Jamie listens in silence, never letting go of my hand and when I've finished, I flop against his shoulder and my tears soak through his T-shirt.

'I'm so sorry you went through all that,' he says, eventually. 'That man is scum. Worse than scum. I can't even think of a word for him.'

‘Do you know what made it even worse? He didn’t even think he’d done anything wrong. He acted as if it was consensual, as if I hadn’t told him to stop.’

Jamie’s hand lets go of mine and clenches into a fist.

‘He even used to try to call and message me, can you believe that? I used to ignore them all, delete them before I’d even read them, but when Kayla was three months old, just before I left, something made me read a message he’d sent. He said he’d been thinking about me and wondering whether I wanted to have a drink with him at his place. Looking back, I think it was that text that really tipped me over the edge. The fact that the words by themselves were so harmless, so polite even. I can’t describe what that did to me. It was like he was doing it to me all over again with his silent denial. Reading that text made me want to die.’

Jamie grabs my hand again, and when I look at him I notice his eyes are glistening. ‘Did you reply?’

‘No. No way. I deleted it. I couldn’t bear to have it on my phone. Why did he keep contacting me? Why would he do that?’

‘More manipulation and controlling behaviour. I think I might know the answer to this, but why didn’t you go to the police? When it first happened?’

There’s no simple answer I can give to this. It was a culmination of lots of things. Firstly, I didn’t think they’d believe me. I was there voluntarily having a drink with that man. We’d built up a kind of friendship and I even enjoyed his company, often staying for a chat after I’d finished tutoring. He might have even got Justin involved to try and say I’d spent a lot of time with his dad, and I couldn’t let him drag that poor boy into it. I explain this to Jamie. ‘You know, a lot of women would consider him an attractive man.’

Jamie shakes his head. ‘None of that should matter. Even if you were attracted to him in any way, you still said *no*. You didn’t want it to happen, and he knew that.’

‘I know. It’s just... as soon as I left his house I began to doubt myself. You know, maybe I didn’t fight hard enough, maybe I wasn’t being clear enough when I was telling him no. Maybe he thought me kicking and thrashing at him was part of some fantasy.’

‘That’s understandable.’

‘And then I also didn’t want life to change. I didn’t want Aiden to know and feel guilty that he couldn’t stop that happening to me. I didn’t want to be a *victim*. For people to look at me with pity, like you are now.’

‘It’s not pity, Eve. It’s admiration.’

‘Thanks. Anyway, as time went on, I tried not to think about it. I buried it in a corner and made sure it was well and truly covered. I was convinced that if I ignored it then my life with Aiden could carry on as it was. Nothing would be different. But then I missed my period and had to take a test. I think I knew it would be positive before I even saw the line on the stick. After one horrendous act I was pregnant. I convinced myself I’d have another miscarriage; after all, I’d already had four so what were the chances of this pregnancy being okay? That’s what got me through at first. But every week that went by with me still being pregnant, only made me sink even further into a hideous depression.’

I also tell Jamie the other reason I didn’t report Alex Foley to the police was because I didn’t want him having anything to do with Kayla. ‘I didn’t even want him to know of her existence, or question whether she might be his. I wanted so badly for her to be Aiden’s, and I know that sounds so messed up, but it was easier to convince myself nothing had happened and just shut that man out of my thoughts and life.’

‘Eve, I’m so sorry you had to go through all that,’ Jamie says. ‘So Aiden’s definitely not—’

I shake my head and cut him off. ‘No, and I never told him. I couldn’t. All he wanted was a family, and I’d already told him I didn’t want to adopt. I know this will seem weird but I didn’t want to break his heart. I knew he would have loved a child who wasn’t genetically his, so it felt like the only thing I could do.’

I continue with my story, revealing to Jamie – a man who only a few months ago knew so little about me – the most intimate details of my postnatal depression. How the second Kayla was born I struggled to bond with her because all I saw was Alex Foley and what he did to me. How, triggered by that final text message, it got so bad that in the end I had to leave because I was worried I was a danger to my own daughter, that I might harm her. How it took me two years, with the help of counselling, to heal, so I knew that Kayla would be safe with me.

‘I’m so sorry I thought the worst of you,’ Jamie says, shaking his head.

‘That’s only because I never gave you a chance to know me.’

‘Everything makes sense now. The reason you couldn’t let me in. I get it all now.’

We sit holding each other, talking everything over until the sun rises in the sky, shining through the blinds. And even though the future is far from certain – with Kayla, with Jamie, with Mum – all I know is that right now, I’m right where I need to be.

FIFTY-ONE

Four months later

Kayla rushes towards me, her long hair tied in a ponytail which swings from side to side as she runs. 'Eve, Eve!' She almost bowls me over in her excitement, even though she's a fraction of my size.

'How's my girl?' I say, lifting her up into the air and twirling her around.

She giggles, and there is no sound better than this, nothing more uplifting.

Sophie catches up, the twins running beside her, and she pulls me towards her; another thing that can't be beaten is one of Sophie's bear hugs. 'How are you doing?' she says. 'You okay?'

'I am right now,' I say, placing Kayla back down and watching her run off with Jasper and Jensen, all of them chasing after each other as if it's the most exciting thing in the world. I remember how much I used to struggle telling Sophie's boys apart, but now that they are four it's easy to see the subtle differences in their features.

'I'm so sorry,' Sophie begins. 'I—'

'Don't, Soph, please. You don't need to apologise for anything. Come on, let's sit.'

It's October now and, other than us, the park is empty. I lead Sophie to the same bench we sat on those months ago when I first came to see her. It's not just the weather that's different now; everything has changed.

'It makes me sick when I think about it all,' Sophie says once we're sitting. 'Alex Foley got away with it for all this time. I really hope he goes down for it.'

'They're trying to build a case, but it's his word against mine. I have no proof. And he's now trying to claim that I'm only saying he forced me because my husband found out I'd cheated on him.'

'That piece of shit.'

'I can't believe he went to Aiden months ago and told him we'd had an affair. That's what started Aiden off.' The worst of it is that now he wants access to Kayla, and I don't know what I can do to stop him. 'He's got

money, Soph. That's what scares me. Money helps people to do anything, to get away with anything.'

'That's true. But don't ever stop fighting.'

We both know that I won't. If there's one thing I've learned about myself from all this it's that I never give up. Not ever.

Everything being out in the open was never going to be straightforward, and when the truth was finally out, I struggled with the issues that will affect Kayla for the rest of her life. A DNA test by the police has confirmed that Alex Foley is her biological father. There's nothing I can do about that and both the choices I'm faced with have far-reaching consequences for Kayla. If I keep it from her as she gets older, and then she finds out somehow, I can't bear to think about how that would make her feel. And finding out is highly likely given how easy it was for Aiden to prove he wasn't her father, after Alex Foley had planted the seed in his head. All it took was a DNA testing kit from Ancestry.com – a present Nicole had got him which she thought might help him fill in some gaps about his own biological family. Now Kayla's results are on there, easily accessible.

And if Kayla found out in this way, not only will she have to deal with what Alex Foley did, but also the fact that I kept it from her. It's already bad enough that I missed out on over two years of her life. On the other hand, if I tell her the truth then she will always have to live with the fact that her father is a rapist.

This, more than anything, is what has prevented me sleeping so many nights. Until I realised that, ultimately, there is only one choice. I will not lie to Kayla about who she is. And it will be my job to make sure she has enough confidence to handle the sadness, or anger, that she will inevitably feel at times.

'How are you finding having three kids to look after?' I ask Sophie, although I already know. She's thrown herself into it like she does everything else and is doing a damn good job.

'You know this is only temporary, don't you?' she says. 'They'll make a decision soon and Kayla will be living with you. Where she's meant to be.'

'I hope so,' I say, 'but in the meantime there's no one I'd rather her be with.'

'I'm so sorry about how I treated you,' Sophie says. 'I'll never forgive myself.' She has apologised to me every time I've seen her, even though I always assure her there's no need, that I understand completely. 'And I

know what Damien thought about me and Aiden, but I promise you there was never anything more than friendship between us. I admit I probably got too involved in his life but being there to help him made me feel closer to you, and I missed our friendship.'

I take her hand, just like I always do when guilt overwhelms either of us.

Still running around the park, Kayla squeals as Jasper catches up with her and they tumble to the grass. A few months ago, I wondered if we'd ever see her smile again, but Cassie, the child psychologist, has done wonders for her, and with small steps is helping Kayla adjust to everything that's happened.

Sophie smiles. 'It's definitely helped her being around the twins. They're such comedians it's impossible not to feel happy around them. Not sure where they get that from as it certainly isn't Damien. He's not even forty, yet he seems to have turned into this grumpy old man. I never thought that was actually a real thing! I can assure you it bloody is!'

'I hope it's not too much for him having Kayla living with you?'

She laughs. 'Well, he does liken our house to a zoo, but he's only joking. He loves her to pieces and is thrilled to be helping. Everyone's on your side, Eve.'

This is a relief. It's amazed me how many people are rallying around me now that everyone knows the truth. I only wish I'd been able to speak out before, instead of isolating myself from the world.

'That's good to hear. How did it go yesterday, then?' I wasn't going to ask her, wasn't sure I wanted to know anything other than what the police tell me about the case, but now I'm here I have an overwhelming urge to know everything. The more information I have, the better prepared I will be to keep fighting for Kayla.

When Nicole first begged Sophie to see her, so that she could explain her part in it, Sophie refused. And she refused every time after that, until I told her she should do it. Perhaps I softened because I know what it's like to be desperate to explain yourself, only to keep hitting a brick wall with people. I can't take away the fact that Nicole raised Kayla for all that time, and ultimately did what she could to keep her. Would I have done any different?

Aiden, however, I find it harder to feel anything but anger towards. If he'd just tried to keep me from Kayla by taking her away himself, then I might have understood. But the chilling and calculated way he tried to mess with my mind is unforgiveable.

‘Are you sure you want me to talk about Nicole?’ Sophie says.

‘Tell me.’

I listen intently while Sophie explains that she met Nicole in a bar, after the kids were in bed. ‘There’s no way I would have let her come to my house, not with Kayla there. And I didn’t want to go to her sister’s place either. A bar seemed like the best option.’

To Sophie, Nicole had looked like a ghost: pale and thin, nothing like the confident woman she’d been before. Sophie had almost walked past her, not realising it was her until Nicole grabbed her arm as she walked past her table.

The first thing she’d told Sophie was that she had no idea what Aiden was planning to do. She only knew that Aiden wanted Kayla far away from me, and that was of course what Nicole wanted too.

‘Do you believe her?’ I ask Sophie.

‘I think so. Wait till you hear the rest. She said she had no idea that Kayla wasn’t Aiden’s, and it was a huge shock to her. She swore that she would never have helped him hide Kayla otherwise.’

‘Isn’t it all too convenient, though? Now that they’re in trouble with the police, suddenly she didn’t really know what was going on?’

‘Perhaps. But I really believe Aiden was manipulating her too. Did you know she can’t have children?’

This is a shock to me. ‘What? No, I didn’t. How did—’

‘Remember when she had to go to hospital that time you were there?’

I recall it clearly; I can picture the way Nicole was doubled over in pain as if it’s happening now in front of me. ‘Yes. She said they were doing tests but she was really vague about it.’

‘That’s when she found out she had endometriosis which was so severe that there was no way she’d ever have her own baby. It had spread to her bowel even.’

‘That’s awful.’

‘She told Aiden, and according to her, that made him even more desperate to get you away from Kayla. They’d always planned to have children – not quite yet as they felt Kayla was still so young and needed them, but in time. She said this was so devastating for them.’

Along with the sadness I feel for Nicole, a twinge of sympathy finds its way into my bones for Aiden. We’d had years of infertility and loss together and then it was happening all over again with Nicole. Worse, though, as

she'd been given a definite answer. I, at least, had the label 'unexplained', which gave me a fraction of hope.

It was after Nicole had been in hospital that she became cold towards me, suddenly not wanting me to see Kayla when before she'd been my strongest advocate. I mention this to Sophie.

'Well, this explains why. I think she was worried that Aiden and you would reconnect because of Kayla, and she probably felt she couldn't compete, especially when she would never be the mother of his child. She had no idea that when she disappeared with Kayla, Aiden would practically move you into the house. She thought he would eventually join them and that you'd give up hope of ever finding Kayla.'

'And what? Stop looking? That would never have happened.' I stare at the ground. 'Does she know that Aiden and I slept together?'

Sophie shakes her head. 'I would never have told her, and I doubt he did.'

'It was only once. It felt so wrong. I think that cemented in my head that he and I were never going to have a future. Which is just as well I suppose, as that was never his intention anyway. He just wanted to hurt me, to make me love him again and then snatch it away from me.'

'His idea of payback,' Sophie says. 'Which shows how messed up he was.'

'Did she mention Aiden's parents?' I'm desperate to hear that they really didn't know anything about this.

'Yes, she did. She said Marie and Pete had no idea. Aiden let them believe that Kayla really was missing. Awful, isn't it? Hey, have you thought about whether they'll still be able to see Kayla?'

'She loves them,' I say. 'And they love her. I'll never stop them seeing each other. It's all just so complicated.' I turn to watch Kayla and the twins. 'So what's Nicole going to do now? Please tell me they're not together.'

'No. She's adamant that she's moving on. She did say, though, that Aiden doesn't believe the truth.'

I know this already. The police have been telling me that he insists I'm lying. That I'm manipulating everyone. 'I know why,' I say. 'It helps him.'

'What do you mean?'

'If he let himself believe me, then what does that say about him? He did all of this because he thought I'd betrayed him in one of the worst possible ways, so he doesn't want to acknowledge that he did all this based on Alex Foley's lies.'

It occurs to me now that perhaps Aiden was just as much a victim of that man as I was. I refuse to think of myself in those terms now – I am a survivor, not a victim, a phoenix rising from the ashes.

‘I’m going to see Aiden,’ I say, only just determining to do this now.

Sophie’s eyes widen. ‘Really? Is that a good idea?’

‘Yes, I think it is. I need him to understand. And I know that somewhere inside him is the decent man I used to know.’

Later, I meet Jamie for a drink in Leicester Square, at the same bar I spent the whole afternoon drinking in after he ended our relationship. Apparently, it’s a day of coming full circle.

I’m there early, and when he walks in he waves as he spots me and makes his way towards the table I’ve managed to find us.

He leans in to kiss me and it feels right, as though I’m right where I’m meant to be. As though I am home.

‘So,’ he says, pulling out a chair. ‘Big day tomorrow. I’m finally going to meet your mum.’

‘Yep. Are you ready?’ I’ve already told Mum all about Jamie, even though I’m sure she won’t remember what I’ve said. ‘She has very high standards,’ I joke. ‘It will take a lot to impress her.’ I’m enjoying teasing him, the easy banter we now have with each other that only comes from intimacy.

‘Is that right?’ Jamie says. ‘Well, she’d better get used to me, because I’m not going anywhere.’

And as we sit here while evening merges with night, and talk about Jamie’s parents, and Kayla and Mum, for the first time in so many years, I actually know with certainty that everything’s going to work out.

Jamie wakes me in the middle of the night, gently shaking me until I fully come around.

‘Alex Foley is dead!’

I shoot up, suddenly wide awake, and see Jamie staring at his phone. 'What? How?'

'Apparently they think it was a burglary. Maybe he tried to fight them off and it got out of hand?'

I grab Jamie's phone and read the news article. 'Poor Justin,' I say when I've finished taking in all the details. I should be shocked, but somehow I'm not. And nor am I sad, because now Kayla is free of that monster.

Finally, this is a new chance for me and my little girl. No Aiden, no Nicole, and no Alex Foley. Just me and Kayla, as we should be, together.

EPILOGUE

What goes around comes around. Isn't that how it goes? Poetic justice, perhaps?

There was no way I was going to let a man like you into Kayla's life, and you would have got your own way by throwing around all that money. Well, money can't help you now that you've got what you deserve.

The same can be said for me, of course, because now I've lost everything – although that's to be expected after the things I was driven to do.

And now at least I've made up for my actions; Kayla will never have to know the truth about what you did to her mother, the woman I loved.

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To all book bloggers and reviewers and everyone who has read or is reading this book, thank you for choosing one of my books. There are millions of others you could have picked to read at the time you were looking, so I really appreciate that you chose one of mine. Thanks for continuing to read books and for keeping them alive by doing so. So much in the world is changing but books are here to stay!

A Letter from Kathryn

Thank you so much for choosing to read *The Mother's Secret*. I hope you enjoyed it! Books should take us on a journey as well as entertaining us, and I really hope I've managed to achieve that with this book. I also hope it managed to take you by surprise!

If you'd like to keep up-to-date with news of my forthcoming releases, please do follow the link below to sign up for my newsletter. Your email will never be shared, and I promise I'll only contact you when I have news about a new release.

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Please also feel free to connect with me via my website, Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. I'd love to hear from you!

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Thank you again for all your support – it is very much appreciated!

Kathryn xx

About the Author

Kathryn Croft is the bestselling author of seven psychological thrillers and to date she has sold over one million copies of her books. Her third book, *The Girl With No Past* spent over four weeks at number one in the Amazon UK chart, and she has also appeared on the *Wall Street Journal*'s bestsellers list. With publishing deals in fifteen different countries, Kathryn has just finished writing her eighth and ninth novels and is now working on book ten. After twelve years living in London, she now lives in Guildford, Surrey, the place she grew up, with her husband and two children.

Also by Kathryn Croft

The Other Husband
The Lying Wife
The Mother's Secret

For more information about novels by Kathryn Croft please visit
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